

A CONSTANT NOISE



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A Political Farce

by

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EPIGRAPH

In politics, what begins in fear usually ends in folly.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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NESTLED BETWEEN ITALY, AUSTRIA, AND SLOVENIA lie two tiny republics usually forgotten by the modern world. In the happy, peaceful country of Serenno, where the weather is always pleasing and people mind their own business, Borgo is one of the most peaceful towns, famous as a place where nothing ever happens. Borgo sits east of the mountains at the nation's border on the bank of the Alluva River and enjoys lovely scenery and infrequent, opportunely timed floods. Directly across the river, bound to Borgo by two picturesque bridges, lies the town of Vijnul in Roijna, a country only rather less perfect than Serenno. The two towns, Borgo and Vijnul, together form a sort of international city. The Roijnans visit Borgo to shop in the market and eat in the fine restaurants, and the Serennians visit Vijnul to enjoy the theaters, concerts, and museums. Thus each town profits from the proximity of the other, and everyone is contented and happy.

On a sunny afternoon in May one of the most contented citizens of Borgo, the bureaucrat Ugo Onesti, sat awaiting his wife and mother-in-law over a glass of wine in the neighborhood café. Over a glass of wine and a piece of pastry. The wine was a local vintage, red, rather dry, a nice complement to the strudel, and Sig. Onesti sighed comfortably. His smile broadened when his neighbor Aldo Tretta entered the café. "Aldo! Now the day's complete!" He pushed a chair out from the table in invitation.

"I thought I'd find you here." Tretta wedged his large belly between chair and table and cast a studious eye upon the strudel. "Fortifying yourself for the great occasion, eh?"

"Certainly, certainly. A man needs all his strength when his eldest son is graduating." He tapped his own large belly. "Have a drink with me?"

"Well ... maybe just a small one ..."

Onesti gestured to the waiter, who immediately brought another glass of wine for one of his best customers.

"And a piece of strudel, of course?"

"Oh, well, now, I shouldn't, but, well, maybe, well, a little piece wouldn't hurt, don't you think?"

Onesti responded gravely, "Certainly not. Just a pick-me-up."

"Mm, well, maybe you're right ..."

The pastry was brought, the two glasses were raised. "To your son," Tretta toasted.

“Thank you, thanks.” They drank. “A big day for him, you know. Now he’s truly grown up. Not a child anymore. He’ll have to put away childish things, start thinking about his future. No more games. No more fooling around.”

“Well, perhaps one last night of fooling around. Remember our own graduation.” Tretta tasted the strudel. It was, as always, delicious. “We handed the devil a few laughs in our time.”

“You were a terrible kid, Aldo.”

“You were worse! Always embarrassing me, getting us into trouble.”

“Me! Ha! Aldo, sometimes I can’t believe what comes out of your mouth.” He sipped his wine. “Just boys having fun, every kid carries on like that.”

“Sure. Any boy who doesn’t isn’t my idea of a boy.” Tretta looked at his plate glumly: the strudel had somehow already vanished. He picked up his glass again. “But your Pietro’s a good one.”

“Yes, he is,” Onesti said with pride. “A very good boy. Never causes trouble, not a bit. Does his chores, gets top marks at school, never troubles his mother.” He glanced out the window at the street where people were passing by unaware of the importance of this day.

“That’s right. A good boy. Not like us.”

The two friends sat together quietly for a short while. Café Ris was one of the more refined bistros in Borgo and prided itself on its sophistication. It was modeled on Viennese cafés, at least on the one its owner had visited twenty years earlier. Customers could sit as long as they wished over a single cup of coffee or glass of wine, no questions asked. Café Ris didn’t attract the masses. Working folk preferred the Café Manrico on the corner, where there was always a crowd and lots of noise.

“Where’s Giuliana?” Tretta asked.

Onesti roused himself from his meditations. “Hm? Oh, she and mother will be here soon, they’re getting dressed.” Onesti emptied his glass and considered for a moment whether he should order another, then decided no. “Well, what do you think about this call for a by-election?”

Tretta sighed.

“Yes,” Onesti said, “always some scandal or other. And over what? Nothing, absolutely nothing!”

“Where there’s smoke ...”

“Oh, get away with your smoke. So what if he’s strayed a bit from the straight and narrow? What’s that mean? A mistake, a misunderstanding at most. You listen to me, it’s all the fault of the papers. No, don’t deny it, they take anything, anything at all, and puff it up like a hothouse flower until it stinks of scandal. Ridiculous! Just to sell their lousy rags. Well, bury the dead and let the living

enjoy the estate, that's what I say. In this case the damned reporters might actually be helping us without meaning to. Canale will most likely replace that idiot Stanco, he'll be an improvement. Stanco, everything considered, is worthless."

"Oh, now—"

"Yes, worthless," Onesti repeated emphatically. "He's done nothing, absolutely nothing. And these days, with the so-called Progressives coming up —"

Tretta laughed. "How you talk!"

"—when they threaten the very basis of our government, well!"

"Ugo, you talk just like a politician. You ought to run for Stanco's seat yourself."

"You don't believe it?" Onesti rapped his index finger on the table. "They want to overturn the constitution with their crazy notions, increasing unemployment pay and all that rubbish. Imagine, getting paid not to work! Liberal nonsense. Trying to turn us into France, that's what they're doing. In fact, this scandal Stanco's got himself into could turn out a good thing for us Conservatives. Now we can put someone in there who'll rein in the Progressives and get something done."

Tretta smiled. "We'll see soon enough. Really, you ought to run for office."

Onesti puffed out his narrow chest at his friend's compliment. He had just decided that he would, after all, order another glass of wine, when his wife and her mother entered the room. The two women, looking very smart in similar blue dresses and hats, joined the men. Tretta and Onesti stood, and Tretta bowed. "Good afternoon, ladies."

"Beautiful!" Onesti said. "I look quite drab next to two such beauties!"

"Flatterer." Giuliana sat down. Her mother, Sig.ra Sette, smiled, adjusted her gloves, and sat when Tretta offered his chair.

He found another for himself. "It's not flattery, of course," said Tretta, "but I was just telling him, with that golden tongue of his, your Ugo ought to run for Parliament in this by-election they're threatening."

The two women laughed. "Don't joke about such things!" Sig.ra Sette said. "We need him right here at home."

"You've been talking politics, of course." Giuliana sighed. "I can't understand why you bother. Sometimes I think it's just an excuse for an argument."

Onesti grew solemn. "Politics is the duty of every citizen of a republic, dearest. In a monarchy, perhaps not, a private citizen under a monarchy has practically no influence. Likewise in a totalitarian state. But in a republic—"

"You hear that?" Tretta cried out. "Another speech! He really should run for

office.”

They all laughed.

Sig.ra Sette said, “But Ugo is right, Giuli’, it’s our duty to have a knowledge of politics. You’re voting for Sig.ra Nova of course, Aldo?”

Tretta glanced at Onesti. “Well ...”

“Mother, Mother!” Onesti protested. “Our never-ending argument,” he explained to his friend.

“My son-in-law is too young to remember what it was like after the war. If he’d ever known such times ...”

“Yes, Mother, just think.”

“If he’d known such times, if he’d seen crowds of starving people, innocent people, unemployed. If he’d ever been hungry himself ...”

“I’ve been hungry,” Onesti said with holy mien.

“Oh, yes!” She poked his belly.

“I’d just decided,” Onesti said to Giuliana, “to indulge in another little glass of wine. You want something?”

Giuliana shook her head. “No, love, we don’t have time. Look at the clock. Aldo, you know what’s happening today.”

“Yes, congratulations.”

“Isn’t your niece graduating today, too?”

“No, no, another year before she graduates.”

“Another year? And she’s such a big girl.” Giuliana stood. “And so lovely!”

Tretta pushed to his feet. “Thank you.”

Onesti also stood. “Yes, I guess we’d better hurry.” He put some money on the table. “See you later, Aldo.”

“Goodbye. Goodbye, ladies.”

Outside the café, Giuliana took Onesti’s arm. “Really, Ugo, we should hurry. I don’t want to be late.”

“Should I get us a taxi?”

Sig.ra Sette said, “Oh, it’s such a pretty day, let’s walk. We have plenty of time, more than half an hour.”

“Yes, let’s walk,” Onesti said, feeling the effects of the wine and thinking that a short walk might be wise. “Come, love, Mother, let’s go down by the river to via Oprava. I’ll buy you flowers for your hats.”

Giuliana said anxiously, “Well, if we don’t dawdle.”

“Of course not.”

They walked, not too quickly, past the bookstalls where students chatted and flirted; past the two Indian restaurants planted next to one another like conjoined twins (but the western one was the better); past the Roijnan tobacconist where

Onesti bought his daily cigar. The spring sun shone brilliantly, the air was fresh after its trip across the river. Giuliana looked at her watch.

"Where's Vito?" Onesti asked.

"Somewhere, with his friends. You know how boys are."

"Hm. You'd think he could go with his family to see his own brother graduate." He shook his head.

"He'll be there. Bees must buzz."

"Just two more years and he'll be graduating, too. He's not a baby."

"My children are growing up." Giuliana's hand trembled on his arm. He pressed it tight.

"Just as mine did," Sig.ra Sette said. "That how the world works."

"Mother, please," Giuliana said, but with a smile. "I already feel quite ancient."

"Oh! Just wait, Giuli', just wait."

At the riverside they stopped for a moment to watch the barges and boats going by. Here was the famous marketplace. Lorries honked their horns, stall owners screamed shrilly, short, square Roijnans pushed carts piled high with the great red strawberries that were a specialty of their land. The sight of all this commercial activity brought a grin to Onesti's face, for he worked in the provincial Department of Finance as a tax commissioner. Every sale sounded like clinking coins in his heart's piggy bank. He cracked his knuckles and slapped his chest for sheer good humor.

Someone called out to them, and Onesti recognized Karl Mitek, a Roijnan manufacturer with whom his boss played cards occasionally. "Hello, Mitek!"

"Hey there, Onesti! Good day, Madame Onesti."

Giuliana nodded to him. "Good afternoon, Sig. Mitek."

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Mitek rubbed his hands together. "Taking a little walk, eh? A break from the office?"

Onesti grinned. "Yes. Today our son is graduating, so we're off to the school."

"Congratulations! Great!" Mitek stuck his thumbs in his pants pockets.

"That's wonderful. My little Elena's graduating, too, but not for another week. I suppose the kids in our country get to learn a little more than yours." He laughed. "All our babies are growing up."

"That's what Giuliana was just saying, weren't you, Giuli'?"

"Yes, I was just saying that."

"And you, Mitek," Onesti said. "Why aren't you in your office? Giving yourself a holiday?"

Mitek grinned at the sky. "Oh, no, no. I have a meeting here, very important

meeting.”

Onesti’s ears pricked up. “Mm? Where? Who with?”

“You’ll find out, in good time. For now, my lips are...” He made a locking gesture before his mouth.

Giuliana said, “Please excuse us, Sig. Mitek, but we really must hurry.”

“Of course, of course. I have to rush, too. Enjoy yourselves. Congratulations again!” He walked off swinging his arms and giving a tuneless whistle.

Onesti watched him go. “A good fellow,” he muttered. “For a Roijnan. Did you catch that comment of his? Their children learn more than ours. Very witty. Very funny. Almost a compliment. I wonder who he’s meeting ...”

Giuliana took his arm and pulled him away.

Two streets further on they entered the flower market, one of Giuliana’s favorite places. The spring flowers blinded the eye with their jewel-like colors and glorified the air with their perfume. Onesti sneezed twice. Sig.ra Sette picked out a big magnolia for her hat, Giuliana wavered between white roses and simple daffodils, then finally chose a cascade of white lilac. Now they really were late, and hurried out of the flower stalls to via Oprava and the lyceum.

The lyceum was a building in the Greek style built of red brick and granite, with six tall columns supporting the pediment. Over the entrance was carved in antique letters the motto, “Upon the Education of its Children Depends the Fate of the Nation.”

Profound, Onesti thought.

The families of the graduating students already filled the school’s lawn. Several teachers chatted with parents here and there, the Preside stood on the front steps shaking one hand after another. Giuliana looked around and said, “There’s Vito. Vito! Over here, love! He doesn’t hear me.”

“Where?” Onesti squinted at the gang around Vito. “I don’t recognize those boys. Who are their parents?”

“I don’t know. Come, Ugo, we must say hello to the Preside.”

“Very well,” Onesti grumbled. He was not particularly happy with the Preside of the lyceum. She was a Progressive, always trying to change the curriculum according to the latest fad theories; luckily, the Board was not easily taken in. And she had worked for Nova during the last election. But he had to admit, she never discussed politics with the students, as far as he knew. She was at least prudent.

They got in line to greet the Preside. In front of them was Sig. Gluck, the local butcher. Everyone greeted everyone and offered congratulations. Onesti found an opportune moment to excuse himself and went to find Vito. He crossed the lawn to where Vito slouched with his friends.

“Vito.”

“Huh?” The boy turned. “Oh, hey, Papa.”

Onesti winced at that “hey” and said, “Your mother and grandmother are waiting.”

Vito shook his long hair out of his eyes. “Do I have to?”

“Now.”

The other boys stifled snickers as Onesti led Vito away. “Don’t argue with me in front of your friends,” Onesti hissed. “Who are they? I don’t know them, do I?”

Vito shrugged. “Just guys from my class.”

“But who?”

“Well, the tall one’s Aronne Fazzoli, the one with the glasses is Ivo Garrani —”

“Garrani?” Onesti interrupted. “Marcello Garrani’s son?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Onesti nodded thoughtfully. The Garrani family were all lawyers and stockbrokers, well known in the capitol. He asked no more questions.

“Ah, here they are!” said the Preside. Giuliana and Sig.ra Sette were now at the front of the line. “Good afternoon, Sig. Onesti. Hello, Vito.”

“Hey,” Vito muttered.

Onesti shook her hand and said in his friendliest manner, “Sig.ra Casoni, so good to see you again. Well, another class sent off into the wide world.”

“Yes, and a more promising class I’ve never seen. Your Pietro is a true scholar. I’m sure he’ll have great success at university.”

“Thank you, we’re very proud of him.”

Sig.ra Casoni turned to Vito. “And I’m sure Vito will be following in his brother’s footsteps, won’t you, Vito?”

Vito hung his head.

“Well,” the Preside said brightly, “it’s almost time to begin. Please go in and find your seats. We must start promptly.”

The auditorium filled slowly and Onesti and Giuliana greeted this or that neighbor as they moved through the crowd. When they sat down Vito said, “I’m going to run to the toilet,” and tried to escape, but Onesti grabbed his wrist and pulled him down into his seat.

“Think ahead, Vit’. You never think! There’s no time for that now, you’re just going to have to wait.”

“But Papa—”

“Not a word.”

“Pa!”

“Sit down and be quiet!” He turned to his wife. “Giuliana, where does your son get this kind of talk? ‘Hey’ and ‘Pa’ and who knows what else! Look at your brother.” He turned back to Vito. “The Preside praises him, the teachers rave about him, he’s going to university and you don’t hear him talking like that.”

Vito pouted.

Giuliana said calmly, “Don’t get so excited, Ugo, there’s nothing wrong with Vito. That’s how young people talk today. It’s just slang.”

“Slang!”

“They all do it. Even Pietro.”

Onesti raised his eyebrows. “Not in front of me, he doesn’t!”

Giuliana smiled at Vito. “And Vito won’t talk like that again, not in front of you, will he?”

Vito snickered.

“And he snickers!” Onesti exploded. But just then the Preside appeared on stage and the graduation ceremony began.

The ritual progressed as all such rituals do. Sig.ra Casoni made a speech. The families applauded. Sig. Stiero, the Vice Preside, made a speech, a little longer than his superior’s. The families applauded. Two students made very long speeches praising the staff, the faculty, the board, the town government, the President and Parliament, the glorious nation, its glorious history and no less glorious future. The families applauded. At last the students received their certificates, the families applauded, and everyone fled the overheated auditorium.

The Onestis had scarcely made it to the door when Vito disappeared in a burst of “Toilet... see you at dinner ... ciao!” Ugo’s eyes went wide and he looked to his wife. She just shook her head. Sig.ra Sette clucked her tongue.

“Well,” Onesti said, “let’s find Pietro. At least one of our children isn’t ashamed to be seen with his family.”

“Remember how you were when you were a boy,” Sig.ra Sette said. “Every child’s like that.”

“I remember perfectly, and I was always respectful to my father. I sat with him without fidgeting. I said ‘Yes, sir’ or ‘Yes, Father.’ I listened to all his good advice.”

“And then went out and did exactly what you wanted.”

“Never!” He fought back a smile. “Not when he could find out.”

The two women laughed.

Sig.ra Sette said, “There’s Pietro. At last! If I don’t give him a hug right this minute, then I’m not his grandmother.”

Pietro stood with a friend of his, a boy named Paolo Bassano, whose mother

owned the best bakery in the province, a popular hangout for the townspeople and especially for the young folks, who ate rolls and pastries and sandwiches and gossiped there after classes. Sig.ra Bassano was with the boys and seemed to be speaking seriously to Pietro, but stopped suddenly as the Onesti approached. She was a short woman, thin, seemingly fragile, but her hands were heavy and red from years of kneading dough. Her pale brown hair, for once liberated from its customary hairnet, floated around her narrow face in a faint nimbus, and her gray eyes looked up at Onesti with a quick smile. "Sig. Onesti, and the dear ladies! Congratulations to you all."

"Thank you, and congratulations to you, Sig.ra Bassano. Congratulations, Paolo."

"Thank you, sir."

"You must be happy with your Pietro today, yes?" Sig.ra Bassano said. "Such a fine young man. I'm proud that he and my Paolo are good friends."

Giuliana said, "I'm afraid he's been frequenting your shop too much. I know he must be a bother to you."

"No, of course not. In fact, he's a help to me, he makes Paolo study. He's a real scholar, that's what Paolo says. I'd bet he's going to be a professor."

"Professor?" Giuliana laughed. "No, my Pietro's too practical for such a life. He's always been interested in science and that sort of thing."

"Oh, I could see him as a professor," said Sig.ra Sette. "Yes, easily. He has that tweedy look. And so serious! What would you teach, dear? Maybe ancient Greek? Homer and the miseries of Agamemnon? 'Mênin áeide, theá ...' That's it. I can't remember any more."

Pietro blushed. He was a tall boy, very slim, pale, knock-kneed and awkward and adorable as a colt. Because of his height he often hung his head, self-consciously, to look up at people, shyly but eagerly, through the tuft of blond hair that hung over his forehead, drawing the hands of every woman who met him.

Sig.ra Bassano put her hand on Paolo's arm. "Well, our boys will do what they want. Everyone has to row his own boat. We can only watch and wish them luck."

Onesti said, "A little advice won't hurt, if they listen."

"Of course. A wise man knows that he knows nothing."

"But," Onesti said, "I notice that they're eager to get off to their parties. What do you have planned, men? No, don't tell, I don't want to know! It's better that we old folks remain innocent."

The adults laughed, the young men exchanged looks.

Giuliana asked Sig.ra Bassano, "Have you closed the shop? I don't remember

your ever doing that before.”

“Yes, it’s the first time since my husband passed on. You understand, a widow can’t allow herself ...”

While the woman talked, Onesti drew Pietro away a few steps and said, “Do you need anything for tonight? A little money?”

“No ... thanks, Papa,” Pietro said.

“You’re sure? A little extra can’t hurt.”

“I have enough, Papa. But ...”

“Hm?”

Pietro hesitated. “I ... I might be a little late getting home ...”

Onesti chuckled. “If you weren’t, I’d start to worry about you! Here, take this.” He pressed a few bills into Pietro’s hand. “Have a drink or two on me. Just remember, Piet’, enough is better than too much. But you probably won’t understand that until tomorrow morning.”

Pietro took the money and quickly stuffed it into his pocket. Onesti turned back to the women, who were chatting amicably, waiting for the father-son moment to end.

“It’s about time we started home, isn’t it?” Sig.ra Sette said. “Dinner’s waiting.”

“Yes, we’d better let the boys go,” said Sig.ra Bassano.

Onesti said, “Are you going our way?”

She glanced at Paolo. “No, thank you, Sig. Onesti. I have a few errands to run before dinner. So nice seeing you. Congratulations again.”

The two boys hurried off. Onesti and Giuliana watched them go. “I hope,” Giuliana whispered, “he doesn’t enjoy himself too much.”

“Giuli’, he’s too serious to enjoy himself too much. But maybe tonight he can let loose a little of that seriousness.”

The evening meal consisted of potato soup, goose liver, stuffed pork chops with a wine sauce, fried mushrooms, and after the dishes were cleared, honey cake, strong coffee, and a glass of plum brandy for the proud parents. Vito appeared just at the beginning of the meal, said nothing while they ate, and jumped up to run away before the coffee was brought out. Giuliana said, “Vit’, love, are you going out?”

Vito mumbled something.

“Do you think you’ll be going by Sig.ra Bassano’s bakery?”

Vito looked at them warily. Onesti was filling his coffee cup with cream. “I don’t know. I wasn’t going anywhere in particular. I guess.”

“If you happen to be in the neighborhood, and if she’s open — I know the

shop was closed today for the graduation — but if she's open, perhaps you'll ask if she'll have any of those lovely fruit tarts in the morning? I think they'd be nice at breakfast, don't you, Ugo?"

Onesti shrugged. "Anything you like."

"So. Well, if your father doesn't mind ..."

Onesti looked up. "No, no, go on. But watch out that you don't come home too late, Vit'. We expect you before nine. *Before*."

Vito jumped away from the table, "Okay okay," and was gone.

Liberated, he strolled alone through the twilit town, shuffling his feet, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders slumped forward. "Before nine, before nine," he muttered to himself. "Like I'm some sort of baby! They don't talk like that to Piet'. Piet' gets to do whatever he wants, and he's only two years older. Pa probably even gave him money to get drunk. Never gives me a dime for anything. Piet' won't get drunk. Prig! He's probably sitting with a couple of geeks arguing over the second aorist passive form of some Greek verb. When I graduate, just watch!"

He kicked at a pebble.

There were still a number of people on the streets, but Vito saw no one he knew. He walked aimlessly, first up the hill, where expensive detached houses stood in wide lawns and fancy gardens, then down the other side toward the river, where barges bumped against the wharfs and houseboats with their windows lit rocked queasily. He stood a while watching them, smelled the pungent reek of the river, sweet and rancid. He tossed a rock into the water. The splash started a dog barking on one of the houseboats. Vito wandered away.

A few minutes later he was down among the shops. He thought, Well, I'm here anyway, maybe I will go to the bakery after all. Have a coffee. He wiggled his fingers in his pockets; a few coins jingled. Maybe Carlo and Rossi are there... . He came to the bakery, and the window was lit. He walked up and tried the door. Locked. He put his face up to the glass and peeped in. Empty. Where was everybody? Ah, over in the corner someone sat at one of the tables. And there came Sig.ra Bassano from the back room behind the counter.

Vito raised his hand to knock, then stopped. The person at the corner table had leaned forward, and Vito saw it was Pietro. With Pietro was a girl.

Interesting! Vito sneaked back to the window and peeked through. He had never seen this girl before. She was probably pretty, but she looked as if she had been crying. Very, very interesting. Who was she? And what the hell was she doing with Pietro?

Pietro and the girl stood up and moved toward the door. Vito raced across the street into a dark shadow. Sig.ra Bassano unlocked the door and let Pietro and

the unknown girl out. She said something to them, they nodded and walked away, Pietro's arm around the girl's waist. So, Vito thought, Piet' isn't quite the prig he pretends to be!

Vito followed them cautiously as they walked to a park by the river. It was now full night, the moon had not yet risen, the paths were almost invisible. Only a few people loitered here and there. Everything was as still as a spring night can be.

Pietro and the girl sat on a bench by three birch trees. Vito hid himself behind the trees and listened. He could hear only whispers, and then the girl was crying again. Vito's thrill of voyeurism disintegrated; he felt tears well up in his own eyes. But he watched.

Pietro kissed the girl tenderly on the hair. She started back, then fell against him and kissed him, hard, on the mouth. The two lovers made one shadow. Then, as Vito watched, the kiss became something more urgent.

Vito's mouth fell open. He stepped backwards and shut his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked up at the stars that filled the sky like frozen fireworks. He threw his arms out and gave a silent cry. For the first time in his life, he could feel the earth spinning beneath his feet.

He hurried home. It was already after nine, Pa would raise hell.

2

FRICCHI, THE CAPITOL OF SERENNO, was founded in the thirteenth century by King Bruno Fricchi II. The first King Bruno Fricchi had been chief of a band of brigands that terrorized the surrounding mountains and finally, by the might of their arms (and their limitless savagery), controlled several villages on the central plain. In 1242 King Bruno was murdered by his eldest son. With filial devotion, the self-proclaimed King Bruno II continued the family business and increased its holdings until he ruled over all the countryside between the Alluva and Varna Rivers. In his later years, at the advanced age of thirty, he grew slightly paranoid and killed his sons, wife, and her brothers, then built a large castle on the peak of Mount Lavi where no one and nothing could get at him. In fact, the road to the castle was so steep that few horses or even mules could make the climb, and finally the great King Bruno II starved to death.

A cousin seized the throne. He built a village at the base of Mount Lavi and raised a modest hall for himself: the climb to the castle did not attract him. He renamed himself Malatestino I, but no Malatestino II was forthcoming, and at his death various pretenders battled furiously for many years to rule the sparsely populated little country. During this period three kings proclaimed their sovereignty in a single year, one for a mere seven days. Even a woman ruled for a while, Queen Carmela of holy memory. Of holy memory because she enslaved more than 2,000 people to build a rather impressive cathedral. The cathedral still stands, the 2,000 slaves are long since dead, as is that short-lived queen. The civil strife finally petered out when a second cousin named Carlo took the throne. He was vaguely related to the Hapsburgs, enjoyed a long life, and sired many children, most of them congenital idiots.

Thus nations are made.

The town of Fricchi grew slowly over the centuries and the castle fell into ruins, but its grim visage still frowned grumpily down upon the usurping stepchild on the plain below. In the year 1841, revolution shook the land and the king then ruling, Carlo VII, fled breathlessly up the mountain to the castle, where he hid for two weeks. The people eventually calmed down, the throne stopped rocking, and the king returned, with more dignity than he had displayed in flight. But progress is undeniable and in 1921 his grand-nephew King Attilio II abdicated, retiring to Paris to enjoy himself for a change. With great pomp the country was rechristened a republic.

The first deed of the new republic was to build a paved road up the mountain

to the castle in order to attract tourists, who never showed up.

The current President was Bobo Zanni, one-time manager of a pencil factory, which went bankrupt; proprietor of a fish factory, which burned down; and owner of a soccer team, which never won. He was a popular president because he did nothing and did it well. He was a good-looking man, with lots of thick gray hair, an impressive Roman nose, and a ready smile that he could turn on and off like a spotlight.

Just now he was not smiling. He was pacing back and forth in his bedroom in front of his advisor, Reno Pucci, who sat serenely on the bed, eating mints one after another. The President sputtered and spumed, his usual manner of attempting thought. Often his raging sputters would so terrify his associates that one or another of them would come up with a halfway decent idea out of sheer panic. At this time, however, the advisor Pucci was not feeling particularly inspired.

“That windy-brained idiot!” Zanni hissed. “Stanco, that barely functional imbecile! Caught red-handed at the worst possible time for us! And over what? Money? Oh, no, that’d be too easy, nobody would give a rat’s ass about that. Over a woman, a woman, like a randy kid!”

“And money,” Pucci said. “Don’t forget, he used public funds for his fling.” He shook his head. “Very sloppy.”

“Caught, and didn’t even have the brains to deny the charges!”

“Hard to do in the face of that video.”

“But I supported him! I campaigned for that bastard! The papers are already linking me to this mess. Shocking, absurd insinuations, they almost accuse me of booking the hotel room for them! It’s his wife’s fault,” he raged, “she started it all! Couldn’t she have turned a blind eye, at least for a few months? There’s more at stake than her damned marriage. No, she wants a divorce, *and* — *and* she goes to the papers!” He collapsed into a chair. “There’s no such thing as party loyalty anymore.”

Pucci noticed that all his mints were gone.

“A by-election,” the President moaned. “And at the worst possible time!”

“By-election or not, it’s not necessarily a bad thing that Stanco’s out of the way.”

“Not a bad thing? Stanco’s a boob, but he’s a good Party man. Flexible. Always votes the way we tell him. Now we’ll have to train some other idiot. And since they’re calling this a Conservative scandal, the Progressives could actually win! Damned newspapers. Damned reporters! They stir up the people just to sell their stinking rags. Those hyenas slap a rat and howl like they’ve brought down a lion.” The President groaned.

“Don’t worry about them, they’re easy to handle. We’ll distract them with something or other.”

“But what? If they hadn’t found out about that idiot Stanco ... This by-election’s coming at the worst possible time. If the Progressives gain that seat ...”

“Not likely,” Pucci said. “Canale’s a good fellow, mostly honest, he won’t get caught doing anything bad, or good, for that matter. In the eastern provinces the Progressives don’t have any base. Anyway, Caprio’s not an important province, only one senator, and the people there have no history of activism. Now, if this had happened in Ostino ...”

Zanni shivered. “Don’t even joke about such a thing. Damned students!”

“Calm down.” Pucci poked his fat hands into all his pockets but could not find a single mint. He grunted and heaved to his feet. His expensive blue suit was wrinkled and caught in the folds of his enormous body. Pucci was grotesquely fat, but his head was small, almost bald, smooth and white, like a billiard ball perched atop a huge muffin. He paused to catch his breath. “So we’ll think up a distraction. Anything will do. Maybe some actor or actress will get married or divorced.”

“Don’t tell me!” Zanni cried. “I leave it all up to you. I don’t want to know anything about it, not a thing. I have to stay clear of this, there can’t be the merest hint of prejudice against me. If you embarrass me ... you’re on your own in this, Pucci.”

“As always,” Pucci murmured.

“What?”

“You’re late, you know. For the cabinet meeting.”

The President looked at his watch. “Damn it! Well, let them wait, the worthless boobs. They never do anything I want. Vaghi, Luca, the rest — worthless.” During this brief tirade Zanni rushed out of the bedroom. Pucci followed as quickly as he could.

At the front door stood a young woman who handed the President his briefcase, overcoat, and comb. “Stop, sir!” she called out as Zanni charged at her. “There are reporters outside, comb your hair.”

“God double-damn it! Thanks, Angel’, can’t let the dogs see me at less than my best.” He combed his hair. “How do I look?”

“Put on your smile.”

The spotlight flicked on.

“Good.”

Zanni turned to Pucci, who had just reached them. “Angelica is the only one I dare trust around here.” He glared at Pucci. Then: “Ready!”

Angelica nodded and opened the door. The threatening hum outside grew into a full roar as a swarm of reporters noticed the President. There were only ten or fifteen of them, but for Serenno this constituted a swarm. The President stepped out.

“Sig. President!” the reporters hollered. “Sig. President! The Stanco scandal, what did you have to do with it?” “Sig. President! How much money did Stanco grab?” “Sig. President, why hasn’t Stanco been arrested?” “Sig. President!”

As if he hadn’t heard a single question, Zanni said cheerfully, “Good afternoon, my friends, good afternoon.” He stumbled into the swarm, something like panic behind his eyes.

“Is it true that you bought Stanco a ticket to Brazil?”

“Good afternoon!”

“Sig. President, did you order Stanco to deny everything?”

“Hello!”

Pucci interposed himself between the President and the swarm; one of his many talents was his sheer bulk. No one could get around him. He moved slowly towards the limousine that awaited the President. Zanni, almost hidden behind his advisor, kept smiling and waving. Angelica Bosco, the President’s secretary, guarded the rear, but she was small and inexperienced, resolute but not muscular, and one reporter, like a hyena sensing her weakness, moved in for the kill.

“Sig. President!” The reporter darted past Sig.ina Bosco and shoved a microphone into the presidential face. “What do you have to say about this Conservative catastrophe?” she asked.

President Bobo Zanni wheeled on the daring woman. The spotlight flicked off. “Catastrophe? Did you say catastrophe?” With all the haughty dignity he could muster, he said, “Do you think the poor judgment of one man can undermine our entire Party? Do you think one man’s alleged misdeeds — I say alleged, this is still a nation in which a man is innocent until proven guilty — that one man’s alleged misdeeds can taint the whole group? If that were the case, then one fraudulent reporter would be the ruin of you all, wouldn’t it?” He smirked. Two weeks earlier a reporter for the *National Post* had been caught misrepresenting facts in a series of articles. The President had frequently giggled over this.

The reporter was not to be put off. “You’re the head of the Conservative Party, the Party that has proclaimed itself the arbiter of our nation’s morals. Senator Stanco is a Conservative, his misconduct shames you all—”

“No!” Zanni thundered. “Absolutely not! Whatever the truth behind these charges, the Conservatives are and always will be people of the highest morals.”

“So you’re saying that the Progressives are immoral?”

The President glared at the reporter and said coldly, “I don’t much like the tone of that question.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon, Sig. President, but it’s my job to ask you questions. Also my duty. That’s how the press functions in a free country. Maybe you forget that.”

He glared at her another moment, then the smile blazed back into place and he turned away.

“Friends, why did you stage this ambush? You know we have a press conference scheduled at—”

“Three o’clock,” Angelica whispered.

“—at three, plenty of time to meet your evening deadlines. I’ll gladly respond to all sensible questions at that time. Now if you don’t mind, I’m late for a very important cabinet meeting.”

Pucci immediately plowed forward, Zanni and the secretary fell in behind him. The limousine door opened and the trio jumped in. The limousine sped off with a roar.

The group of reporters broke up. One of them stopped next to the daring woman. “If you keep talking like that to the old goat, Anna, he’ll get you shut out of the Palace. One doesn’t do such things.”

“I do, Davide,” she answered. She switched off her recorder and stowed it away in her shoulder bag. “Someone has to. I didn’t hear anything interesting coming out of your mouth.”

He grinned. “Things still puttering along at *The People’s Voice*?”

“As always. Too much work, too little pay. And the *Post*?”

He nodded. “Oh, sure, although that trouble over Benno and his articles put a crimp in our anniversary party. One bad apple ... But Zanni just reminded us of that, didn’t he? Thanks to you.”

She snorted. “That man hates anyone who doesn’t buy his bullshit. He won’t ban me from the press conference, he wouldn’t dare, he knows how I’d play that up. Oh, if he only would! What an article I could write.”

“Always stirring up trouble.”

“Yes! You bet! Sometimes the people need a voice.”

“Right. The people can’t be trusted to speak for themselves. Anna Fadena, Voice of the People.”

“Davide Delsano, Voice of Nothing In Particular!”

“Thanks.” He bowed with a mocking smile. “But you don’t need to offend Zanni. Why bother? Honey catches more flies than vinegar. Especially presidential flies.”

“And shit catches even more.”

He bellowed a laugh. "What a mouth! In what school did they teach you that kind of language?"

"School of the Streets. A most eminent university, many of our national heroes got their degrees there. But of course you're not familiar with it, not with those shoes and that coat. What a dandy you've become!"

He looked down at himself. "My shoes? Yes, nice, aren't they? And the coat was made to order, at Zupilnik's. Do you know it? In via Oino? One of the wings of your alma mater."

She laughed.

He bowed again. "Thanks for acknowledging my sparkling wit."

"Don't push it."

They started off together down the street. "Anna, it's time you lost that willful naiveté of yours."

"Cynicism is also naiveté."

He frowned with thought. "Interesting idea. 'Cynicism is also naiveté.' That's good. I'll put it in my notebook, if it's all right with you."

"Just be sure to credit your source."

"Mm-hmm. 'Cynicism is also naiveté... .' There's some good argument against that, but I don't have time to work it out now."

She looked at his face: craggy, with bushy eyebrows, the nose just starting to get an old man's bulb. There was a time she had found him attractive, but too much whiskey had flowed under that particular bridge. Still, though desire had long since dissipated, some affection remained. "Davide, let's go have a drink. It's a few hours before the press conference."

"No. No, thanks."

She played at shock. "The Great Delsano says no to a free drink?" Her expression changed. "Ah."

"It's nothing."

She tried to set her face into steely disapproval, but blushed instead. Her squared jaw, chilled eyes, thinned lips, all undercut by a simple blush. "So. It's begun. Who told you to avoid me?"

He didn't answer.

"Sorry. Of course, no orders necessary. That was my naiveté speaking."

He said, "Try to understand."

She tossed her head back. "Fine. I understand perfectly. Well. I'll see you at the conference. Ciao!" She stomped away.

He looked after her as she vanished around a corner, then glanced down at his expensive shoes. "Shit."

In his limousine, President Zanni relaxed with a sigh. "Sons of bitches. They're all sons of bitches. Are my trousers in one piece?"

The others looked at him, puzzled.

"The hounds were nipping at my ankles."

A moment. They laughed appreciatively.

Zanni patted the leather upholstery of the car seat. "Just think, not so long ago I walked to the office every day."

Pucci grunted. "A car's more convenient."

"Yes indeed, very convenient. Imagine walking to the Palace with them following the whole way! And that damned insolent woman. What's her name?"

Pucci started. "Eh? Oh. Fadena, Anna Fadena."

"How could I forget? She's always scratching at me with her cat's claws in that damned rag she writes for."

Angelica said, "Forgive me, sir, it was my fault she got through."

Pucci frowned. "Terrible mistake. But the President pulled it off perfectly. Wounded innocence, moral dignity. Perfect response."

"It wasn't bad, was it?" The President glowed with pride. "Without a script, too. I always could think on my feet. But it was a mistake, Angelica. Don't let it happen again."

She expressed appropriate penitence.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, they don't have a lick of shame or simple courtesy in them. Yet not long ago they treated me with respect, like civilized people. I don't understand how these things change. Pucci, do you think I should hire a bodyguard? Like the president of the United States?"

Pucci's fat face showed bland surprise. "Perhaps ..."

Angelica's eyes went wide. "But Sig. President, if you hire a bodyguard you'll appear less friendly. To the people, I mean. They're already ..." She snapped her mouth shut.

"Already what?" Zanni said.

"I beg your pardon, sir. But some people say you ... have a swelled head."

Zanni grimaced. "Swelled head! Me?"

She added quickly, "If you hire a bodyguard, it's like putting a wall between you and your people. It might look as if you were afraid of them. Of course you're not afraid of them, you're not afraid of anything, but it would look ..."

Pucci said, "Appearances are important."

"Yes," Zanni nodded, "appearances are important."

"I'll do better, I promise," Angelica said.

Pucci sat back heavily. "Well, a bodyguard's something to consider. It would be better, though, to avoid these situations."

The President nodded. "Tomorrow we'll go out the servants' entrance."

"Good idea."

The trip to the Federal Palace took only ten minutes: the Palace was located less than two kilometers from the President's home. As they pulled up, Angelica gasped.

"What?" asked the President. Then he saw. "God double-damn it!"

Before the Palace doors waited another swarm of twenty or more reporters.

"It seems that Serenno has entered the modern media age," Pucci drawled.

Angelica whispered, "I didn't know there were so many reporters in Fricchi."

"I didn't know there were this many in all of Serenno! Pucci!" Zanni cried.

"What should we do?"

"They've already seen us. If we drive off, the headlines this evening will be 'President Zanni Runs From Reporters.' They'll think you have something to hide. Not good."

"Not good, not good ... Damn it! I've already talked to them once, that ought to be enough," he whined. "Why isn't it enough?"

Angelica touched his arm respectfully. "Sir, you have to. *We* have to."

The President scowled at Pucci. Pucci nodded. Zanni said, "Well." He flexed the muscles in his jaw. "Open the door."

The door was opened. The limousine was quickly surrounded.

"Sig. President! Sig. President!"

Zanni hissed at Pucci out of the side of his mouth, "Get their names. Every single one of them. And tomorrow get me a bodyguard." He stepped out. "Good afternoon!"

The three at last managed a reasonable retreat into the Palace. A guard, having opened and closed the door for them, saluted with a finger to his brow. "Hello, Sig. President. Beautiful day. Little excitement out there, huh?"

Zanni glared at him for a long moment. The guard said to himself, "Just like the papers say, he's got a swelled head."

"What's that?" the President barked.

"Hm? Didn't say anything. Sir."

The President whirled on Pucci and growled, "Never again."

"Just bad luck. But your customary aplomb—"

"Shut up."

Pucci shut up.

Zanni started down the corridor. "Where are my notes?"

Angelica, trotting behind, pulled pages out of the briefcase. "Here."

He took them. "Pucci, come!"

He stalked off to the cabinet chamber, Pucci lumbering at his heels like a

steer. Angelica watched until they disappeared round a corner, then walked slowly to her office, which connected to the President's. She went to her desk, set the briefcase beside it, and sat down. Several seconds ticked away. Suddenly she covered her face with both hands and burst into tears. That lasted one full minute. Then she brusquely slapped her tears away, blew her nose, and opened the briefcase to straighten the papers that had fallen out of order.

The cabinet members were already gathered around the big cherry table that filled the chamber. They were chatting excitedly when Zanni and Pucci entered. As one they turned to face him. He barked out, "Good afternoon!" then stared with surprise. Every minister sat with clothes awry, hair mussed, face pale, eyes wide, fearful and angry. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Reporters!" they all shrieked.

"You too?"

"They came out of nowhere!" said Mauro Luca, Minister of Peace: a short, fat man, bald, lacking both intelligence and prudence. He had avoided military service through his father's influence. Incapable of controlling his hair-trigger temper or of thinking ahead more than five minutes, he was the head of the nation's military. Just now, however, his collar was unbuttoned and his pudgy hands were shaking.

"It's an attack, a veritable attack!" gasped Dionisios Vaghi, Minister of Finance: a man with black hair despite his more than fifty years (some suspected it was dyed). Thin to the point of gauntness, he treated the national treasury as his own, and contested every expenditure except his salary. Born to wealth, a product of the best schools, as narrow in his opinions as in his experience, he had never had an original idea in his life and had never acknowledged need of one.

"Isn't there a law against such brutality? Why are we ministers if the law doesn't protect us?" bleated Eufemia Frusoni, Minister of State: forty years old, with a square jaw, a tiny mouth, an almost nonexistent nose, and slightly crossed eyes; she was not beautiful but what some deemed handsome. Her dress was askew, her shoes scuffed, but her auburn hair was unscathed, in perfect order, like a helmet on her head. A brilliant professor before her government appointment, she treated her colleagues as if they were students, and not very bright students at that. Tact was not her forte.

"What'd you say? Speak up! The lousy battery's gone dead," cawed Umberto Fedoro, Minister of Secrets: eighty years old, as withered as last year's potatoes. Eyes red and sunken, nose like a paring knife and often dripping. Deaf, probably senile, a friend of Zanni's father, thus his unimportant post where he couldn't do much damage.

This was the cabinet of Serenno. Every one a good Conservative, every one respectable and above reproach.

Zanni groaned. "What's happened to our country?"

"It's a new age, sir," Pucci replied. "And not a polite one."

"Terrible!" The President sank into his chair. "Well, gentlemen, and lady, you see the problem. Stanco's idiocy has stained us all. We're here to decide what exactly we should do. We've got to nip this problem in the bud."

"In the bud?" said Frusoni. "The thing's already in full bloom!"

Vaghi said, "We've got to shut up these reporters. Isn't there some law we can use to stop them writing such muck? There's got to be some law we can cite to put the fear of God into them."

"Lock 'em all up," Luca suggested. "Make examples of 'em. Lock 'em up."

Pucci shook his head. "No, we daren't go so far, Sig. Luca. Imprudent. If we attack the press in any way, they'll counter-attack with headlines. The media in other countries will line up with them against us."

The President closed his eyes at the prospect. "That would mean chaos, absolute chaos. We can't afford to have the whole world watching us. Not now, not when we're likely to have a by-election to win."

"And that loan we're negotiating from the World Bank," Vaghi interjected.

Luca regained his equilibrium. "Yes, the loan. We can't forget about the loan."

The others calmed down at the word *loan*.

The President looked around the room. "Where's Salo?" he asked.

The others made indecipherable noises.

Zanni grunted. "Wonderful. A cabinet meeting and the Vice President can't be bothered to attend. A crisis for the government, and where's the Vice President? Who knows!"

"Eh?" Fedoro screeched. "Speak up!"

"I am speaking as loud as I intend to! Do you want us all as deaf as you? Well! Does anyone know where the Vice President is? No? Fine! We'll go on without him, as usual. Pucci!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You're my chief advisor. Advise! What do you suggest?"

Pucci set his hands on the table, fingertips delicately lined up together. "Let's clarify the problem. The Conservative Party has carefully positioned itself over the years as guardian of morality and bastion of fiscal prudence. This scandal Stanco bumbled into has compromised the Party, firstly by his being caught in an immoral act with that woman, secondly by his having used public funds to support the aforementioned woman. He will certainly be removed from his seat

in Parliament to stand trial. This will leave a traditionally Conservative seat empty. The Conservative Party has recently enjoyed a bare majority in Parliament, but once Stanco is removed our majority is gone. A by-election will likely be held, and while the province is historically Conservative, popular disaffection could shift the political equilibrium. If by some strange chance a Progressive should happen to be elected, or even more unthinkably, a Socialist or Communist, we will almost certainly find ourselves deadlocked. I think this puts the situation succinctly?”

“A brilliant summation of the obvious,” Zanni growled.

“You, Sig. President, could appoint a replacement, under our constitution, but that would be inadvisable, considering the way the press is already trying to tie you in with the scandal. Alternatively, the province can also appoint a replacement to the seat, but if we let them take that route, they may appoint a Progressive or lesser-party candidate simply as a sop to public opinion.”

“We have to put on the pressure immediately,” Luca said.

“I would not advise interfering with the province’s decision,” Pucci countered. “Even discreetly. Any leak would lead to disaster.”

“But a by-election ...” said Vaghi.

“Would be safest,” Pucci said.

The others fell back in disgust.

“I say it would be safest. Caprio province is, as I said, historically Conservative, and a by-election will take at least eight weeks once the decision to remove Stanco is finalized. Plenty of time for the public to forget this scandal and their outrage. However, if the press keeps reporting this mess of Stanco’s, if they keep it fresh in the public’s mind, it could swing an election unfavorably.”

Frusoni interrupted. “We’ve got to stop them!”

“Yes, but not noticeably. To do anything directly would draw the wrath of the international community, and there goes the World Bank loan. No. We want the press to help us, not hinder us.”

Federo banged his fist on the table. “Help us? Did he say the papers will help us?”

“Not hindering is the same as helping, Sig. Federo. Forgetting about Stanco is the same as helping us. You understand?”

“We understand,” Zanni said impatiently. “We all understand. What we don’t understand is how!”

“I’ve already told you, Sig. President. We need a distraction. A distraction to draw the attention of the press away from the scandal. That’s how other governments control their press. Well, if our press has started behaving like those in France, Germany, the United States, we must learn from our more

experienced colleagues.”

The President sat thinking for a time. “Mm-hmm,” he said, “all right. What sort of distraction?”

Pucci shrugged. “Almost anything will do. But it should be interesting enough and important enough to draw attention away during the whole of the by-election. All the better if it makes the Party look good and the Progressives bad.”

Zanni nodded. “All right. Suggestions?”

No one spoke. They looked at one another like rabbits expecting a hound. Then they all looked back at Pucci.

Pucci betrayed no anxiety. “Sig. President, it’s almost three o’clock.”

“Double-damn it all! The press conference! What am I going to say?”

“Do you have the notes Angelica prepared?”

The President touched his jacket pocket. “Yes, right here.”

“Then you’re fine. We should go.” Pucci stood.

Zanni stood up, his chair squeaking on the marble floor as he pushed it back. “You,” he barked at the ministers, “think! I expect to hear some decent ideas when I get back. Distraction! That’s your job. Pucci, come.”

He and Pucci exited the room. The ministers puffed out their cheeks.

The press room was filled with reporters. It seemed every paper, radio station, and television station had sent someone to find out what the President would say. On the dais stood a lectern, a small table with a carafe of water and a glass, and, hanging from a golden pole, the flag of Serenno: three gold stars on a green field. The noise in the room bubbled until Pucci appeared through the rear curtain and made his way to the lectern. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Federal Palace. I’m happy to see you again after such a long time.”

The reporters, most of whom had been outside the Palace or the President’s home, chuckled.

“We’ve invited you here today to discuss recent events that have caused us much concern. You may have heard something of them.”

The reporters laughed again.

President Zanni, listening behind the curtain, breathed more easily. That fat man really knows how to work a crowd, he thought. Maybe I can get through this torture after all. Now, if we can only find a distraction.

3

THE PROVINCIAL BUILDING in Borgo is an old fortress constructed of the local gray stone, with a gray tiled roof and high, narrow windows originally intended for use in defense against armies or rebellious peasants. Flower boxes filled with anemones at every window do little to soften the severe appearance of the façade, but the populace is so used to it that they scarcely notice it, as one tends to forget how ugly one's uncle is, with the hair growing out the top of his nose and ears. Located in the Old Marketplace, it enjoys a view of the fountain of Samoso Savodri, a provincial hero who in 1542, during the Anabaptist uprisings, saved the town through the artful ruse of burning most of it to the ground, which caused the Anabaptists to lose interest in the place. To the west of the Provincial Building is the Church of St. Athos, patron saint of nothing in particular; the church has an accomplished choir, which gives concerts throughout the region. To the east is the Federal Bank, the only bank in town, built of steel with vast expanses of glass, a derivative example of the American style. Cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and so disturbing that next to it the Provincial Building appears a miracle of aesthetic purity.

Ugo Onesti took the tram every workday from his apartment to his office in the Provincial Building, and every workday, when he got off at via Vanzetti and crossed to the Barrier, his heart rose up at the glorious sight before him: the macabre stone façade, the windows through which no sunlight might pass, the gigantic doors like a castle's drawbridge. Today, however, his heart rose rather less than usual. He hadn't slept well. Vito had come home quite late, which led to an argument; Pietro came home even later, after one o'clock; he evidently hadn't had more than a beer or two, and yet looked woeful. Why? He wouldn't say. He merely returned the money that Onesti had given him and went to his room. Onesti himself had had more than a few brandies. Finally getting to sleep, he had dreamed, which was unusual for him. He did not enjoy the experience. So today his stomach was sour, his head ached, his customary sunny disposition was a bit clouded. He despised this evidence that he was not as young as he used to be.

He greeted his coworker, Emilio Stasi, who asked, "And how's our proud papa today? Did your boy uphold the family honor?"

"Not so much as I did," Onesti responded.

"Oh! It's that kind of day, is it? Well, prepare yourself. The Chancellor's coming, I just heard."

Onesti groaned. "What for? It's not like him to bother with us."

Stasi shrugged. "Who knows? But there's talk ..."

Onesti pricked up his ears. "Talk? What're they saying?"

"Something big is brewing." Stasi dropped his voice, although there was no one else in the room and the walls of the building were so thick that sometimes the workers could not even hear one another when standing in the same room.

"You know Dante's factory?"

"The arms factory, yes, of course." The factory was one of the biggest employers in the province and Dante a very important businessman in Borgo. A good Conservative, though he did not involve himself much in local politics. Onesti had met him a few times, by chance, at various meetings.

"They say he's selling."

"Really?"

Stasi put his finger beside his nose. "They say he *must* sell."

"No surprise there. He's been suffering lately, I've heard. Canceled orders, two big clients didn't renew their contracts. And the Council denied his request for a loan."

Stasi nodded. "Yes, yes, but why did they deny it?" He peered at Onesti over his glasses.

Onesti raised his eyebrows. "Well?"

"I don't know it for a fact, but ..."

"But?"

"But I've heard it was to someone's advantage that the loan not go through." He rubbed his nose.

"Hm."

"Yes," Stasi went on, "hm, indeed. I don't know it for a fact, but they say that those two big clients who wouldn't renew were talked out of it by the same fellow who got the Council to deny the loan."

Onesti felt his stomach grow more sour. "Ah."

"Yes, ah."

Onesti shut his eyes and rubbed them hard. "I don't like such business."

"Oh, no, it's terrible, just terrible."

Onesti went to his desk. Dante is a good fellow, he thought, despite the business he's in. After all, somebody has to make weapons. The world needs weapons, ergo someone must manufacture them. Better that a nice guy like Dante do it than some unscrupulous rascal. And best that the business stay right here in Caprio, so the province can benefit from it, too. But these kinds of shenanigans leave a bad taste in the mouth.

The silk-vested belly of Chancellor Utero preceded him through the office

door just as Onesti and Stasi were putting on their jackets to go out for lunch. They bowed to him. "Good day, Sig. Chancellor!" they said in chorus.

"No need for protocol, gentlemen," the Chancellor said. "Don't stand on ceremony with me. We're all workers in the service of the state. I'm just paying a little visit. I said to myself yesterday, Massimiliano, you haven't visited the fellows in the tax office for quite a while, those pillars of the provincial government who make everything we do possible. Where's the chief?" He looked around the room.

"At a conference in Fricchi, Sig. Chancellor," Stasi replied.

"Oh, of course, I remember something about that. Can't let the capitol forget us, can we?"

"No, Sig. Chancellor."

A brief silence ensued.

Onesti gestured to a chair. "Excuse us, Sig. Chancellor! Please have a seat."

"Thanks." He settled heavily into the chair. "You too, gentlemen, sit down, sit down."

Onesti and Stasi quickly pulled up chairs.

Another brief silence ensued.

Chancellor Utero tapped his belly. "So then."

The two commissioners leaned forward.

"So then," the chancellor said again, "how's everything going in the office?"

"Well! Quite well!" they both said.

"Yes, very nicely," Stasi babbled. "Everything in order, did you want to see the files?" He half stood.

"Dear God, no!" cried the Chancellor. "I trust you entirely, of course. No need to check on you like a schoolteacher." He laughed. Onesti and Stasi laughed. "I'm glad everything's proceeding smoothly. We all know how important this department is to the province."

"Yes, thank you," they said.

"No taxes, no state, am I right?" He laughed.

"Yes, indeed, you are right." They laughed.

"So. But then, as it happens, perhaps you've heard rumors about a small problem that's been troubling the higher-ups."

Onesti and Stasi stopped laughing.

The Chancellor went on. "Certainly it is a problem when our great system of government suffers financially, but these things come and go, one can't worry about them. And this factory sale being discussed—"

The two expressed appropriate surprise.

"—will solve everything."

“Excuse me, Sig. Chancellor,” Onesti said innocently, “but I’m not sure I understand. What sale?”

“Ah, then you haven’t heard.” The Chancellor was casual. “It’s that munitions factory, you know, just outside of town. They were on the verge of bankruptcy, it seems, but luckily a well-to-do businessman has stepped into the breach and made an offer. Because of his generosity the workers won’t lose their jobs, the province won’t lose a major portion of its tax base, the budget stays balanced, all’s right with the world. The sale closes tomorrow. Of course, to make the deal possible we’ve had to provide the usual stimuli, so we’ll be waiving corporate income taxes for the new owner the next five years.”

Onesti’s and Stasi’s mouths dropped open.

Stasi said, “But that’s usually done only if a new factory is to be ...”

The Chancellor looked at him sharply. Stasi shut his mouth.

The Chancellor continued. “I’ll send copies of the contracts round tomorrow afternoon, just process them immediately, all right? Very good. Well!” He stood. The two commissioners jumped to their feet. “That’s that. I just dropped by to make sure all’s in order.”

“Excuse me, Sig. Chancellor,” Onesti said. “May I ask, who is the purchaser?”

“Oh, a fine fellow, a very nice fellow. Mitek. Karl Mitek. Perhaps you’ve heard of him.”

“Mitek!” Aha! thought Onesti. “Yes, I know him. Know of him. But ... but he’s from Roijna.”

“Mm? Yes, I suppose he is.” He studied Onesti. “And?”

A brief silence ensued.

Stasi leaped into the breach. “And we’ll be waiting for the contracts so that we can process them immediately, as you demanded.”

“Demanded? Please, my dear fellow. As though I need to make demands upon two of the best men in the department! No hurry, no hurry at all, just so long as I have them back by the end of the day. Of course, it doesn’t matter to me at all, but the higher-ups ...” He finally noticed they were wearing their jackets. “Oh dear, what time is it? I’ve kept you from your luncheon.”

“Not at all, Sig. Chancellor!” they cried out. “Think nothing of it!”

“Our time is yours,” Onesti said.

“We’re thrilled to see you any time,” Stasi said.

The Chancellor made his goodbyes and left. Onesti wiped his brow.

“So,” Stasi said, “now we know who bribed the Council.”

“Ssst!” Onesti peeked out the door and listened. “All clear.”

The two commissioners went outside. The Old Marketplace was filled with

bureaucrats and staff going to dine. Onesti and Stasi walked slowly toward the tram.

“What I don’t understand,” Onesti said, “is why Mitek, a Roijnan, would want to buy a Serennian factory. The sly rascal! I ran into him yesterday, you know, purely by chance, on my way to the lyceum, and he was as smug as a cat full of rotten fish. Didn’t let on, not a bit of it, but there he was, on his way to clinch the deal.”

“Of course he wouldn’t let on,” Stasi said. “And risk everything? Not a chance. I just wonder if he’s the one behind the troubles Dante’s had recently.”

Onesti stopped. “You think so?”

“I never think,” Stasi said. “But I wonder. Lots of unexpected problems, after all. If someone really wanted to get a foothold here in Serenno and acquire a munitions factory on the cheap ... influencing clients, that’s not hard to do.”

Onesti shook his head. “But why here?”

“Why not? A factory’s a factory. You don’t find munitions factories on every corner. With a little ambition, and not much in the way of scruples ...”

Onesti frowned. “It bothers me, a Roijnan owning the business.”

“They’re moving in all over,” Stasi shrugged. “The publisher Gulnik Draku? Roijnan. That new restaurant on via Camerra? Roijnan. And not bad, though the food’s a little bland for my taste. And their radio station’s popular over here, too. I listen to it myself sometimes.”

“I tried, once or twice. I don’t like the Roijnan language, it grates on me. I can’t understand it.”

“Yes, it’s a rotten language, all those consonants bunched up together. But the kids like their music. My wife hates it. I can take it or leave it, it’s all noise to me. My parents didn’t like the music I listened to when I was a kid. If they had, I wouldn’t have listened to it! Anyway, the Roijnans are moving in to stay, that’s just how things are. Here’s your tram.” He nodded at Onesti. “See you after.” He hurried off to the bistro where he always lunched.

Ugo Onesti stepped up into the tram and during the six-minute trip home stared thoughtfully at the passing shops. When the tram stopped, he almost forgot to step down.

Onesti entered his building and passed the concierge’s desk. It was empty; Sig.ra Bertucci was no doubt sharing her lunch with her cats. He climbed the stairs, which seemed especially creaky and steep today. He could smell his lunch already: fried cabbage and kielbasa, his favorite, but with his sour stomach and the news he’d had, hardly enticing.

The Onestis lived in a second-floor apartment on via Calvino, just a few doors from the Café Ris. The apartment had three bedrooms, one for Ugo and his

wife, one for her mother, and one for the boys; a large kitchen and dining room; small bathroom and W.C.; a long and narrow parlor with three windows that opened above the courtyard, where tulip trees bloomed in the spring; and a library, which held the family's television and nine books: a dusty dictionary, a medical encyclopedia, an old anthology of poems, a bound collection of magazines that Giuliana had bought for the morocco cover, and four paperback crime novels.

"Is that you, Ugo?" Giuliana called out from the kitchen as he entered. "I've been waiting, you're late." She came out, wiping her hands on a cloth. She held out her cheek for a kiss.

He kissed it. "Yes, I'm sorry. Utero just chanced to visit." He went into the bathroom to wash his hands.

"Has anything happened?"

"Oh, yes, something's happened. You won't believe it." He came into the dining room and looked around. "Where is everybody?"

She filled his glass with mineral water. "Mother's having lunch with Sig.ra Bolla, Vito ran off somewhere like the devil was pricking him, and Pietro just woke up a half hour ago, imagine! Got dressed and left without a word. I'm afraid he overdid it last night."

"He hadn't had much of anything to drink when I saw him, I noticed that right away. Maybe it was something he ate." He looked down at the plate Giuliana set before him. The gray-green cabbage and boiled sausage swam in a greasy pool. His stomach roiled. But he bravely lifted his knife and fork. "Something must be bothering him."

"Growing pains. Maybe he's afraid of going to university, poor boy. So we'll dine *entre nous*. A private party. We could have a glass of wine."

Onesti shook his head, but then said, "A drop of red wine might quiet my stomach."

"Are you feeling ill? Don't touch the mineral water!" She stood, went into the kitchen, and returned with two glasses and a bottle of wine. "I warned you about that fourth brandy last night. Sip this."

"Just a drop, darling, I have to work this afternoon."

"Utero's already come and gone, you can risk a full glass. It's medicinal." She filled his glass. "Besides, you're always saying that Stasi always comes back from lunch stinking of beer."

"It's true, but don't repeat it." Just as he raised his glass, the doorbell rang. He started and spilled a few drops on his shirt. "The devil!"

"Who—?"

"Of course Sig.ra Bertucci is nowhere to be found."

“It’s lunchtime, Ugo, don’t be unkind.” She started to stand.

Onesti said, “No, sit down, I’ll go. You start without me.”

“Why anyone would come to the door at lunchtime ...”

He wet his napkin and dabbed at his shirt front as he went out the door, muttering. Before he had even started down the stairs, the doorbell rang again with an irritating insistence. “Yes, I’m coming. Wait a moment! Here’s my whole lunch hour wasted.”

He reached the street door and opened it. To his astonishment, he found Karl Mitek standing there with a young girl beside him.

“Sig. Mitek! Good heavens. To what do I owe this pleasure—?”

“Not a word!” Mitek roared.

Onesti now noticed that Mitek’s face was red as an apple with anger. He also noticed that Pietro was cowering behind Mitek, slouching even more than usual.

“What do you intend to do about it?” Mitek demanded.

Onesti blinked. “Do? About what? Pietro, what’s going on?”

“What do you intend to do about my daughter and this bastard of yours!” Mitek shouted.

Onesti felt a sinking sensation in his sour stomach as he began to understand.

“You damned Serennians!”

“Papa!” the girl pleaded.

“What sort of son have you raised, you dog on two legs, that would do such a thing to my little girl?”

Onesti swallowed and said carefully, “Now, Mitek, calm down.”

“Calm down? Don’t you give me orders! You Serennian bastard!”

Onesti’s face began to redden. “I said calm down!” he hissed. “Do you want the whole street to know about this?”

Heads were already appearing at the windows above them.

“What do I care what you damned Serennians know or don’t know? You’re all sons of bitches! You just tell me, right now, what you intend to do with this damned kid of yours!” He was pacing up and down, working himself into a frothing rage.

The girl took her father’s arm. “Papa, please, ssh!” She began to cry.

Pietro crept close to her, but Mitek grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him back. “Don’t you touch her, you son of a bitch! If I had a gun, I’d shoot you!”

Onesti’s anger burst forth despite himself. “What’s that? You’d shoot him, eh? Well, you don’t own that munitions factory yet!”

“What!”

“Get inside and behave like an adult. However you people act at home, in

Serenno we don't wash our dirty laundry in the streets."

Mitek glowered at Onesti for a moment. Then, without warning, he raised his fist and punched Onesti in the nose.

"Papa!" screamed the young couple.

Onesti staggered backwards. He touched his nose, looked at his finger, and saw blood. Just a drop, but it was real blood. He hadn't seen his own blood in ten years, maybe longer. The sight infuriated him. Without a moment's thought he threw himself on Mitek. The two men fell to the pavement and rolled about.

A curious crowd quickly gathered around the combatants. Pietro and the girl leaped about yelling, "Papa! Papa!" to no noticeable effect. Then the door opened and Giuliana appeared in search of her errant husband. One glance and she shrieked, "Ai! Ugo! Help, help!" She saw Pietro. "Pietro! Do something! Ai! A crazy man is killing your papa!"

Two neighbors stepped forward to intervene, but someone's fist flew out of the melee and hit one of them on the chin. He fell on top of the two pugilists. As they rolled over again the neighbor, trying to extricate himself, kicked out, knocking the other neighbor in the shin. That fellow hopped on one foot and stumbled into someone in the crowd, who tumbled down, cracking his knees on the cobbles. He groaned, turned, and pushed the hopping man away. The hopping man fell backwards into the rolling trio with a hoarse cry.

That started a general free-for-fall. Neighbor punched neighbor, women screamed at their men, kids kicked anyone who came near. Sig.ra Bertucci stuck her head out of her window and shrieked. Giuliana screamed, Mitek's daughter sobbed, Pietro tried to grab hold of his father to pull him out of the tangled pack but ducked back whenever a fist or foot came close.

It was at this moment that Vito came down the street. He had been roaming around the park by the river, the park where he had watched his brother and the unknown girl the night before; why, he could not have said. But he had lain in the grass, sat on the bench, stretched out in the bright sunshine, and happily wallowed in the unfounded notion that the earth was created just for him.

This poetic mood vanished abruptly when he caught sight of the chaos at his house. First he saw only a crowd of awkwardly battling people, old and young, men and women. Then he recognized his brother in the turmoil, the strange girl, his mother, all jumping about and making a terrible noise. His father managed to get to his feet for a moment, but instantly toppled back down into the mob.

Vito stood staring. Other than a few fights among his friends, he had seen nothing like this, except on the news. It was, by any definition, a real riot.

Then, as if to confirm his observation, the police arrived.

4

PUCCI LAY IN A WARM BATH, his little head half submerged, his belly and breasts rising like an archipelago from a soapy sea. He was reading a newspaper, specifically, an article about European munitions factories secretly selling arms to African warlords. The warlords then used the guns to massacre innocent civilians. He wondered idly whether any Serennian munitions factory had profited from such a trade, and if so, how the government could profit in its turn.

He hoisted himself out of the tub, wrapped a towel around his wide waist, and shaved, because he had to attend a reception at Minister Vaghi's house. A by-election was almost certain, so a reception was being held to celebrate the candidacy of Canale for the provincial seat. Dull, hopelessly dull — the reception, not his razor — but he had to be there to make sure Canale didn't do anything stupid. What should Pucci say to him? What kind of compliment could he give that wouldn't sound hollow? "Thank goodness, Canale, at least *you* never had brains enough to commit a crime." Yes. Good. Remember that.

He dropped his towel and lay down nude on his bed. The bed was huge, soft, with a Pucci-sized hollow in the middle of the mattress. For a moment he luxuriated in blessed silence. No president, no parliament, no politicians. Wonderful quiet. And from downstairs the comforting sound of the two servants doing whatever it was they did to make his life more pleasant. His thoughts scattered and he lay there with nothing at all in his little head. His hands wandered to his belly and lazily rubbed it.

Just for a moment. Time to get up, must go to this damned reception at Vaghi's, must support the Party candidate. At least Vaghi's wife always served good wine and excellent food.

He tried to rise, without success. He grabbed hold of the side of the mattress, pulled, pulled, finally hauled himself to his feet. Once he had not been able to get up by himself and had had to call one of the servants. Embarrassing. He promised himself then to start exercising, but duty had intervened, as always, and the promise to himself was as forgotten as any made to voters.

He put on his pants and slipped on his shoes while buttoning up his shirt. "Tivodor!" he called out. "Come here! Tie this tie for me before I strangle myself!"

The reception was in full swing when Pucci made his customary unnoticed entrance. Vaghi lived in a veritable palace, much larger than the President's home; his father had founded the national railway, which made him rich, and

ended the national Labor Movement, which made him richer. The portico was tiled in marble, with marble steps (very slippery when it rained) and marble columns. Inside, the foyer could comfortably hold fifty or sixty people. Beyond that lay the main hall, also tiled in marble. Here the walls were covered in blue silk. Rows of chairs, upholstered in figured blue silk, were ranged along the walls, and in the center was an enormous table of golden mahogany, laden with dozens of tasty-looking dishes and a large ice sculpture of Ledo and the swan for a centerpiece, a puddle of caviar cradled on the swan's back. Not in the best taste, thought Pucci, considering the reason we're forced into this by-election. Perhaps the caterer was having a little joke. He would ask Sig.ra Vaghi who had carved the piece.

A hand caught his shoulder. "Pucci! Well, what do you have to say? Stanco's out, Canale's in, about time we get some fresh blood into the Party, don't you think?"

Pucci smiled at Sig. Tepe, the banker, an important source of Party contributions. "Yes, sir, Sig. Tepe, yes, all very well, if Canale can just win the seat."

"True, lots of work ahead of us. But I was never happy with Stanco. No head for business, well, just look at the ridiculous situation he's got himself into, and us as well. Unnecessary. A little forethought would have avoided this mess. No head for business."

The banker left him. Pucci moved to the table, eyeing a platter of smoked salmon. He signaled to a waiter, "Champagne, please." Pucci was always polite to servants, who often knew more about their masters than the masters did themselves. Another servant filled a plate with salmon, shrimp, *haricots verts* with almonds. The potatoes looked delicious, bubbling with cheese and freckled with paprika, but Pucci remembered trying to rise from his bed. "No, no potatoes, thank you," he said.

A voice rumbled behind him. "Oh, take some, they are exquisite."

"Hello, Galli." Pucci nodded to the server. Alberto Galli was a political enemy, a Green who resisted every move the Conservatives made, but he was a true gourmand and knew his potatoes.

"I didn't see you come in, Reno. When did you arrive?"

"Not two minutes ago."

Galli's voice burbled just above the deepest depths of human audibility. "You float here and there like a feather in the wind. You've become quite secretive these last few years."

"Your disapproval is most gratifying."

"Reno, you know my disapproval is purely professional."

“Only a spy such as you could truly respect my special talents.”

A hint of a smile played about Galli’s thin lips. He took a prawn and bit it off just above the tail. “You understand I’m only having my little joke.”

“Of course. You’re such a comedian. Someday I hope to see you on the stage.”

Galli’s lips curled a millimeter more. “I’ve always liked you, Reno. Despite our differences, we are brothers under the skin.”

“Heaven forbid!”

“Even if you don’t dare admit it. Wasn’t I right?”

Pucci looked up questioningly.

“About the potatoes.”

“Ah.” Pucci nodded. “Yes, yes, delicious. Perhaps a bit too much paprika.”

Galli chuckled once and departed.

I wonder what he’s up to here, thought Pucci. Probably trying to find a chink in Canale’s armor, some weakness to exploit. Good grief, another night spent saving the Party’s honor. I’d best find Canale before the old goat gets at him. Leave it to him to cajole Canale into some stupid, quotable remark. Not that it takes much cajoling.

He tried to raise a forkful of smoked salmon to his lips, but a delicate hand touched his arm.

“Sig.ra Vaghi!” he said. “Good evening, and my compliments. This is a marvelous feast.”

Sig.ra Vaghi was the archetype of the cosmopolitan, upper-class lady: svelte to the point of anorexia, with a surgically young face floating above a withered neck — a calm, regal face subverted by a sharp smile honed from a lifetime of giving orders to underlings. “Thank you, Sig. Advisor.”

““Sig. Advisor”?”

“Let me be ironic. It’s all that will get me through this night of polite earnestness. You never come visit anymore.”

He bowed. “My work takes more than all my time.”

“So I hear. Zanni can’t tie his shoes without your sage advice.” She drew him from the table. “Come and gossip with me. Most of these people aren’t even interesting as puppets.”

He sipped his champagne. “Not all. For instance, I see someone’s invited Galli.”

“Unavoidable.”

“Did *you* invite him?” Pucci said with real surprise.

“Certainly, booby, no one gets in without my invitation. Our servants are the best. Why shouldn’t I invite him? Fricchi society is so meager... . In any case,

the Greens don't have sufficient power for us to bother snubbing them. Only three seats in Parliament. Soavi is here too, from the Socialists, and Marina Gatalpo, from the Liberation League, desperately trying to learn something from her betters."

She turned to a couple passing, an elderly man arm in arm with a very beautiful, very young woman, little more than a child. "Hello, Roberto, dear! Hello, my dear girl, what a charming dress! French, no? It positively lights up the room, but not so brightly as that adorable smile!" The couple passed by. Sig.ra Vaghi commented softly, "That old dog and his bonbon. I can never recall her name. But why should I? She probably can't remember it herself. Dense as a peach pit. But she knows how to catch rich old fools. You men always fall to a pretty smile and a willing body."

"Stanco certainly did."

She laughed, a sound of tinkling crystal. "Stanco is a fool, of course, everyone knows that, so why should anyone be surprised? I can't imagine why his wife caused such a stir over his affair. I'd be thrilled to have him looking elsewhere for his fun."

Pucci almost choked on his salmon.

"But you're not all idiots. My Dionisios never sighs after childish amusements. If he did, I'd know how to handle it. And you, Reno, you have a head on your shoulders. You never even flirt, so far as I've heard. In fact, some of us are worried about you."

"About me?" He had finished the shrimp during her speech. "No one worries about me. I am invisible. Almost nonexistent."

"Don't be silly. The Party couldn't function without you."

"Now who's being silly?" But he smiled with quiet pride.

She pressed herself against his pillowy shoulder. "It's always you quiet ones who know where the bodies are buried. Come, you'd better say hello to our new candidate, he talks too much."

"Is he nervous?"

"He doesn't have brains enough to be nervous. The perfect politician — manly body, handsome face, and nothing behind it at all, at all."

"Just like Sig.ra Frusoni."

Madame Vaghi exploded with an unladylike guffaw. Several turned to look. She raised a dainty, diamond-spangled hand and stifled her laughter. "Come, here's our new white knight. I'll leave you to it, Reno darling, I don't feel capable of unbridled admiration at the moment."

Dario Canale stood at the center of a small crowd. He blossomed beneath the sunshine of public attention. His red cheeks were cramped in a perpetual smile,

he shook hands with real warmth, and his blond head nodded without cease: the very portrait of self-satisfied ambition. He was also a good head taller than most people. That's good, Pucci thought, people like a tall man, they trust them, heaven knows why, probably because they're afraid of them. Sheep don't take much herding.

Galli was nearby, asking a pointed question whenever the occasion lent itself. Pucci crept around the edges of the crowd to listen.

"First we have to restore public faith in our Party, of course," Canale was saying. His voice trembled with emotion. "This indiscretion of Stanco's has shaken their confidence. Naturally the majority don't react so, they understand that one misjudgment doesn't taint all the good things our Party has done ... is doing. But it's important that we act quickly and confidently to win back their ... confidence." He smiled brilliantly.

Bravo! Pucci thought. Made it through a whole sentence without falling. Not too well balanced, a little stumble at the end, but it'll do for the peasants. He'll be popular in the provinces.

"And second?" That was the soft, basso voice of Galli.

Canale stared at him, a chicken facing an unexpected fox. "Second? Oh, yes, second. Well, second, we need to ... we need to justify that confidence, as we always do. Faithfully." Another brilliant smile.

Not badly done, Pucci conceded.

"I intend, when I enter Parliament, to steer us back to the path from which we've been distracted by this trivial slip: the high moral ideals of our Party. With courageous conservatism, bold caution, and respect for our glorious past, and ... and a healthy regard for our glorious future, we can show the people that we are and always will be the true leaders of our nation."

The crowd broke into spontaneous applause. Pucci frowned. It was disturbing to see Party members falling for their own rhetoric.

"What the Progressives don't understand is that the world is a dangerous place," Canale went on. "A profoundly dangerous place. Everywhere you look, you find crime, rape, war, homosexuality, famine, typhoons, lawlessness, homosexuality, immorality, signs of the decay of moral values."

Every eye was turned to the candidate.

"The Progressives don't understand this simple fact. They want to hand out government funds to the poor, the hungry, the old, to everyone except those who need it most: our military, our industry, our wealthy businessmen. Without them it will all fall apart, everyone will suffer, rich and poor, healthy and sick, old and young, all of us together. Only we Conservatives comprehend the extent of the danger. Only we fear it. The Progressives don't seem to be afraid of anything!

But we Conservatives are afraid of everything. And because we are, we can confront these dangers. Whoever does not fear cannot lead. The fearful are the true heroes! Friends, I'm going to make sure that fear drives us into the future, a future that can be just like our past, when no one was afraid. That's where I'm heading. That's where I'll lead the province. That's where we must lead the entire nation!"

Frantic applause. Pucci watched with some surprise. The ass had a natural talent. He would have to be watched. Whatever the future of the nation, he certainly had a future with the Party. Such bombastic bilge would play well during the campaign. There was a nugget or two in that mishmash that might even be usable as slogans.

Canale caught his breath. "Do you know that only yesterday, in Borgo, in peaceful little Borgo, there was a riot?" Cries of shock. "Yes, it's true. It started with two fellows and grew into an actual riot. Imagine! And one of them is a tax commissioner. The other's a businessman from Roijna. Not criminal low-lives, no, two perfectly respectable men started a riot. What's the world come to that a tax commissioner should start a riot? Even our solid bourgeoisie are not immune to the moral decay that surrounds us. What's next? Priests and nuns battling in the streets? Children beating their grandparents? Homosexuals teaching in the schools?"

Pucci wandered off to a private corner. Yes, he thought, Canale has talent, though he appears to be fixated on homosexuals for some reason. But this story of a riot, about a tax commissioner ... Interesting. And the other man a Roijnan. Where did he say? Borgo? Where the hell is Borgo? Borgo, Borgo ...

He found a servant and asked, "Where is there a telephone I may use? Privately." The servant led him without a word to Vaghi's study and closed the door behind him. The quiet in the study struck Pucci immediately. He could scarcely hear the noise of the party, the walls in Vaghi's house were so thick and the carpets so heavy, of pure wool.

He picked up the telephone, dialed, waited until a sleepy voice answered. "Angelica, do you know Borgo?"

"Wha-hm? Sig. Pucci?"

"Yes, Pucci. Where's Borgo?"

"Burger?"

"No, *Borgo*. It's a town, somewhere in Canale's province. Caprio."

"I'm sorry, I was sleeping." She yawned. "No, I've never heard of Borgo."

"Find out. And find out about a riot that happened there yesterday. Started by a tax commissioner and somebody from Roijna."

"Roijna?"

“Yes, Roijna,” he repeated patiently. “I don’t know if it’s important, but find out, I’ll figure out later what details we’ll need.”

“I’ll call Rosselli,” she said, businesslike again, sleepiness gone. “He can get us police reports.”

“Good. Check the newspapers, there might be an article. Riots can’t happen every day over there. Call me.”

“Where will you be? You’re supposed to be at that reception—”

“Call me at home, after midnight, I have to stay here till then.” He hung up. For some reason his thoughts returned to the article he’d been reading earlier, the one about gun-running in Africa.

He came out of the study and walked straight into Galli.

“Your boy has a gift for empty rhetoric. Or have you been coaching him?”

Pucci sighed. “Galli, don’t you know anyone else here?”

“No one as entertaining as you. I must keep my eye on the competition.”

“Competition? What competition? Here in Serenno we’re just one big, happy family.”

“With some interesting genetic anomalies. So you haven’t been coaching him?”

“This is only the second time I’ve seen him in person.”

“Interesting. Which of his lines are you going to steal for Zanni?”

Pucci smiled. “He does have a way with words, doesn’t he? Our common enemy had better be on guard.”

Galli did not smile. “We Greens have no enemies. We respect everyone. Love everyone. It’s our happiest trait.”

Pucci allowed himself a chuckle. “Anyway, the Greens don’t stand a chance in the provincial election. What do you care about Canale?”

Galli said softly, “The Greens always stand a chance. We depend on the rationality of the people.”

“As I said, not a chance.”

“Grass will grow, even through concrete.”

“Weeds, perhaps.” They had come back into the main hall. “But we don’t want our roads crumbling.”

“You have a way with words too, Reno. Why haven’t you ever run for office?”

Sig.ra Vaghi reappeared with two glasses of champagne. “Here you are!” She handed a glass to Galli. “My two best friends! Alberto, I’ve been looking for you everywhere, do you know Sig.ra Morucci? No? But you must meet her, she adores the Greens! She’s a vegetarian, very stupid and very rich and absolutely dying to give her money away to some worthy cause. Come, before Soavi grabs

her. I promised I'd introduce her to an important member of your darling party." She caught him by the elbow and maneuvered him away. Pucci toasted her silently.

Someone moved up beside him. He turned and saw Vaghi. "Sig. Minister, good evening."

"Hello, Pucci. Adela rescued you, eh? Galli's such a spoilsport."

"Amusing."

"As amusing as a corpse. If he's our green future, give me pollution." He led Pucci back to the bar and ordered two gin and tonics. "Get rid of that champagne, it's not fit for a pig. Here, try the gin. From the Netherlands. Well, what do you think of our new boy?"

"A good fellow. Speaks well. A couple of hobbyhorses he tends to ride, but we can fix that."

Vaghi glanced around the room. "They'll like him in the sticks. I like him too. He reminds me of me, when I was young."

Except for his looks and his build, thought Pucci. But you were just as big an ass.

"He's an idealist, too," Vaghi continued. "But he'll grow out of that, thank God. A world of idealists ... it doesn't bear thinking of." He swigged down his gin.

Pucci was not thinking of idealists, but of Vaghi. Not a bad fellow, just stupid. Rich and stupid. Successful and stupid. And if the world is full of stupid people who can be rich and successful and not particularly wicked, maybe it is better to be stupid. This kind of thinking depressed Pucci, who was not stupid. He knew from childhood that he would work in politics, so he had asked himself, Which party is most successful and most likely to remain so? The answer was, naturally, the Conservative Party. Almost every human being is conservative, after all. If times are good, people want them to continue: Conservative. If times are bad, people want to get rich in order to survive: Conservative. That's why the Conservatives are usually in charge and will usually remain in charge, so long as the world is split between rich and poor, winner and loser. Join the winning team. Be a Conservative.

"What a look on your face!" Vaghi said.

Pucci came out of his reverie with a smile. "Where is Canale?"

"There, by the fountain. Adela's standing guard."

"A marvelous woman."

"She keeps me in order. No more need be said." Vaghi sighed, perhaps nostalgic for disorder. "Without a good wife, how can any man get ahead? Not a wife like Stanco's, of course, she's a real hellcat."

“Because she got angry that her husband cheated on her?” Pucci found his champagne again. He had barely tasted the gin.

“No, that’s understandable, I suppose, even with Stanco. But she betrayed him, and us, the whole Party. Adela would never do such a thing. She might very well murder me if she ever caught me cheating — in fact, I’m sure she would — but she’d do it cleverly and quietly.” He looked at his wife on the other side of the room. “I should probably keep my voice down.”

“Canale’s a bachelor, isn’t he?”

“Hm, yes. But he’s engaged.”

Pucci nodded. “Good.”

“Always thinking ahead, aren’t you? Think you can make him president?”

“Zanni is president and he’ll stay president, if I have anything to do with it.”

“He can’t be president forever. Canale wouldn’t be bad. Good-looking fellow. Has everything one needs. Or what about you?”

Pucci looked horrified. “Me? I’m not ambitious.”

Vaghi laughed. “Oh, no, of course not. Of course not!” He grabbed Pucci’s untouched gin and started off. “As if you were anything *but* ambitious!”

Pucci frowned. Ambitious? No. Only for others. Even his mother had warned him that he tended to disappear behind other people. “Reno, Reno,” she had often pleaded, “you’re a decent man, don’t be ashamed, don’t be modest. Modesty does not pay!” She had never understood that in politics, those behind the scenes hold more real power than the faces before the cameras. And they almost always live longer.

Canale, still surrounded by his admirers, drew near. He reached for Pucci’s hand. “Sig. Pucci! I’m very glad to find you here! I don’t think we’ve met since you came to Reviza, two years ago.”

“The dedication of the new highway, yes, I remember.”

Canale visibly swelled with pride that the President’s chief advisor remembered such a trivial event. He spoke loudly so everyone could hear. “Well, do you think we’ll win?”

“With you as our candidate? I don’t see how we can lose. The President said to me just this morning that he couldn’t find a better man for the job. We hear good things about you, Sig. Canale, very good things.”

Standing in the rear, Galli winked at Pucci.

The evening hummed along successfully and Pucci made his exit just before midnight. At home he found a message from Angelica. He hesitated — it was quite late and he had already woken her once — but he picked up the phoned and called. The phone was answered immediately. “Sig. Pucci?”

He said with a smile. “Doesn’t anyone else ever call you at this hour?”

He could hear her blush.

“I have your information.”

“Good. Proceed.”

“It’s really nothing at all. It started because Onesti’s son—”

“Onesti?”

“Ugo Onesti. Tax commissioner. His son has gotten the daughter of a Roijnan businessman pregnant. That’s Mitek, Karl Mitek, manufacturer. Mitek got angry, punched Onesti, Onesti punched him, and little by little everyone joined in. The police didn’t even charge them. Quite trivial. I can’t think why you—”

“Nothing is trivial. What does Mitek manufacture?”

“Hm.”

He could hear papers rustling.

“He owns a plant in Vijnul. Makes refrigerators, stoves, other appliances. And he’s just signed a contract to take over a munitions factory.”

Pucci’s eyebrows rose. “Munitions factory? Where?”

“Borgo.”

“Borgo!” He shifted the receiver from his right to his left hand. “Excellent! Give me a full report in the morning. I’ll be in early. Thank you, Angelica. Get some rest. See you tomorrow.” He hung up.

A Roijnan buys a Serennian munitions factory and then attacks a Serennian tax commissioner? Pucci felt his toes and fingertips begin to tingle.

Distraction!

THE *NATIONAL POST* has its offices in a steel-and-glass building on the Central Plaza in Fricchi, across from the gardens of the Federal Palace. The contrast between the Palace and the modern office block is exquisite: On the one side a rococo efflorescence in imitation of the Schönbrunn in Vienna; on the other a spartan, grimacing box, unornamented, smugly plain, imitating nothing but the architect's contempt for beauty. Here an array along the roof of neo-Roman statuary, homage to the founders of the Republic; there a series of plain rainspouts, which tend to drench passersby during the least drizzle. Several books mention this miracle of modernity — half of them praising, half condemning — and one summer for three weeks a certain person calling himself an “installation artist” draped the entire structure in an enormous orange tarp. (The installation was planned to last six weeks, but the workers in the *Post* building complained that they couldn't breathe and that the constant orange light gave them headaches, and so the installation was cut short. The artist reacted violently to this insult to his visionary aesthetic and vowed never to return to Serenno, which the local police confirmed.) The noble steel-and-glass cube always draws stares from tourists and citizens alike, though those stares turn quickly from the blinding reflection of sunlight off the glass.

In this building more than a hundred men and women — reporters, editors, secretaries, errand boys, janitors, maintenance workers — labor without pause to bring the news to the people of Serenno. Of these selfless individuals, the most selfless was Enzo Nazario. The epitome of the dedicated journalist, he began his career at the *Post* at the age of 15 as a courier and went on to become, in turn, press operator, typesetter, proofreader, reporter, columnist, assistant editor, assistant chief editor, until finally he reached the exalted rank of chief editor of the political page. He stood 1,52 meters tall, weighed 113 kilos, wore thick glasses through which his eyes appeared as large and multifaceted as a bee's, and had 37 gray, grizzled hairs on his head (his wife kept count) but an abundance of thick, dark hair growing from his nostrils, ears, and chest. His voice grated like tires on a gravel road because he smoked, and he coughed, and hacked, and wheezed, and hawed, so that every moment in his presence was a symphony of sound. No one who worked at the *Post* could remember ever having seen him smile.

Nazario had just destroyed the ego of a young journalist, cutting her 3,000-word masterpiece down to a 300-word filler item, when his intercom buzzed.

“What?” he grunted.

“Fausto is calling,” his secretary’s voice replied.

“Right.” He tossed the mutilated opus back at the journalist. “Get that to comp.” Nazario noted with approval that she was not crying when she left.

He took up the phone. “Nazario here.”

The voice that responded was brightly genial. “Nazario, good morning! It’s Fausto, how are you, my friend?”

Nazario lit a cigarette and sucked on it violently. “What can I do for you, Fausto?”

“Always straight to business. Can’t we chat for a moment first?”

“Don’t have time. What does Pucci want?”

A pause. “You wound me, Nazario. Really, you do. I like chit-chat.”

“Pardon me. Don’t mean to offend. But cut the crap and throw me the meat.”

Fausto laughed. “I do have an item you might want to publish. Today.”

“Impossible.”

“Make it possible.”

“What does Pucci want published?”

“A human-interest item from the little town of Borgo.”

Nazario snorted. “Very interesting. Get on with it.”

Fausto dropped the cheerful tone. “A Roijnan, Karl Mitek by name, is buying a factory in Borgo. A munitions factory. The province granted him tax incentives to smooth the deal. But he started a fight with one of the tax commissioners, a guy named Ugo Onesti. Got that? Word is that this Onesti found out about some underhanded stuff going on in the transaction, and this Mitek punched him one. It turned into a full-blown riot in the streets. Don’t you think the public ought to know?”

“Particularly if there’s a Progressive involved.”

“It’s Borgo. No Progressives.”

“So it’s just your public spirit that wants the news broadcast.”

“I merely suggest you may want to explore this item.”

“And print it today before we can fact-check.” Nazario rubbed his forehead hard. “Could fit it in tomorrow, I guess.”

“Today.”

“Impossible. We already have the evening edition laid out.”

“You can knock something out of the way.”

Nazario sighed. “I suppose you have this all written up just the way you’d like it.”

“Well,” Fausto said, “as it happens, I’ve just written a report on it for the President. All details included.”

“With the slant built in.”

“Again, you wound me, Enzo.”

“Fax it over, I’ll have somebody check as much as they can before the edition goes to print.”

“Two columns.”

“One.”

A pause. “One and a half. Front page.”

“Third.”

“Front.”

“Impossible. Third or nothing.”

A thoughtful pause. “Outside column.”

Nazario considered. “Okay. Tell Pucci it’ll be in tonight’s edition.”

Another momentary pause. “This doesn’t come from Pucci.”

“Of course not.”

Fausto whispered, “Higher up.”

Nazario made an unpleasant noise that was perhaps his version of laughter. “No one’s higher up than Pucci.” He hung up.

Nazario wondered why such a bland story mattered to Zanni. But he had to keep up good relations with the Palace or they would stop sending him leaks. He would give them their four hundred words, slap on an innocuous headline, and print it below the fold.

Now to decide who to assign this puff piece. It required someone agreeable who could write only what was needed and no more. He thought of the rookie who had just left. No, she would still be angry, feel she had something to prove. She might go too far, do real investigation. This needed someone more experienced who could get the facts relatively straight, crank it out, and forget about it five minutes later.

Davide Delsano liked Nazario, even respected him. When Nazario called, he went willingly and knocked on the door happily. Because he was a senior reporter, he walked in without waiting. “Afternoon, boss,” he said. “You got something for me?”

“Here’s a lead.” He tossed some faxed pages at Delsano. “Check whatever facts you can, draft it up in your style, four hundred words. Riot in Borgo. Started between a Roijnan factory owner named Karl Mitek and a tax commissioner named Ugo Onesti. Day before yesterday. Mitek started it.”

“Borgo?” Davide laughed. “Who cares about Borgo? So they had a fight, big deal.” He looked at the fax header. “Aha. *Someone* thinks it’s interesting.”

Nazario nodded. “Fausto.”

“Fausto?” Davide whistled.

Nazario took off his glasses and looked up myopically. “Here’s the angle: the Roijnan’s buying a factory there, got a tax break, started a fight with this Onesti, who’s a tax commissioner. Why attack someone who’s giving you a break unless the guy found out something you don’t want people to know? That’s what we want. Focus on the Roijnan. Obviously a nut, bad temper, violent character, buying up Serennian businesses. Oh, the factory makes munitions. Might be something in that, too. See if you can tie it in to Krenek’s article on African gun-running.”

Delsano scribbled notes. “I’ll start with this Onesti. I don’t need to go to Borgo, do I?”

“No time. Need the article within the hour.”

“Boss!”

“It’s going on the third page. Four hundred words.”

Delsano grinned. “Fausto wanted it on page one?”

Nazario put his glasses on again. “Page three. Under the fold. Not too much detail. Be obtuse, but suggestive.”

“You got it.” Delsano went out the door and stopped for a second, thinking. Fausto equals Pucci, Pucci equals Zanni. There might be more to this than a nutty Roijnan and a tax man getting into it over their fifth beer. But if that’s all the boss wants ... He hurried back to his office, skimming the fax, and picked up the phone.

First the Borgo police. The telephone rang ten times before someone answered, with a yawn, “Police here, who is it?”

“Yes, hello, Davide Delsano here, with the *National Post*, hello. Who am I speaking to?”

The policeman said suspiciously, “Yes?”

“Yes, Officer—?”

After a moment’s hesitation, the officer finally said, “Ochs.”

“Great, Officer Ochs, thank you. I’m calling about an incident that took place a day or two ago, a fight between a Roijnan and one of your people, a certain Onesti, Ugo Onesti.”

More suspiciously. “Yes?”

“Can you fill me in on the facts of the case? What exactly happened?”

A longer hesitation. “You’re a reporter?”

“With the *National Post*, yes,” Davide answered.

The police officer said firmly, “Why do you want to know?”

Davide sighed. “I’m writing an article about it.”

“I don’t know anything.”

Aha. "Well, who would know?"

"I don't know."

This was too much. "Don't you have a report on the incident?"

"I don't know."

"Fine! Let me talk to your chief."

"He's not here."

Davide stifled a bark. "When will he be back?"

"I don't know."

"I'll leave a message."

"Go ahead."

"I'm Davide Delsano. D-e-l-s-a-n-o. With the *National Post*. In Fricchi. Telephone number is 2-43-539. Got it?"

"Yes," the officer said with a yawn.

"You'll give him the message?"

"Yes, yes."

"Did you write it down?"

"There's another call coming in." The police officer hung up.

Davide slammed the receiver down. Peasant! What's his problem? Something's going on out there. What's he trying to hide? This is going to be more trouble than I thought. What to do now? The police obviously won't be any help. I'd better go straight to the source. He took up the phone, dialed.

"Yes, I want a number in Borgo. The tax office. No, for the province." He listened, jotted down the number. "Thanks, put me through, please."

He waited. The telephone rang three times. A quiet voice answered, "Tax Commission, Commissioner Stasi speaking, who's calling?"

Davide wrote down the name. "Yes, Sig. Stasi, hello. I'd like to speak with Sig. Onesti."

A long silence.

"Hello?"

The man said, "Um, pardon me, but may I help you?"

"Yes, thank you, I'd like to speak with Sig. Onesti. Do I have the right office?"

Another pause.

"Hello? Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Do I not have the right office?"

"No, no, you do. Well, perhaps not. Who's calling?"

Davide shook his head. "This is Davide Delsano. I want to speak with Sig. Onesti."

“Well, I’m sorry, but Sig. Onesti isn’t here.”

“When will he be back?”

“Well, in fact, he won’t.”

Davide stirred. “Eh?”

“In fact,” Stasi said unwillingly, “you see, in fact, he doesn’t work here. Not anymore, I mean.”

Davide whistled. “Since when?”

Stasi said softly, “Since yesterday. In fact, that scrape he got into—”

“Yes?” Davide said eagerly.

Stasi stopped abruptly. “Just who are you?”

Delsano thought quickly. “A friend of his.”

“A friend? Then you know.”

“No, no.” He thought quickly. “I ... I’ve been in Fricchi the last few days, I don’t know anything. I heard there was some sort of fight, so naturally I thought I’d better call.”

“Ah,” Stasi said, at ease again. “Well, it’s a terrible thing, just terrible. Poor Ugo! Not only does he find out about his son, but to get fired ... just terrible!”

“Fired! But why was he fired?”

“Because of the fight, of course, why else? He’s a perfectly good worker, a credit to the office. Been here years, even longer than I. But this crazy man from Roijna, the girl’s father, he started it all. He threw the first punch, so I’m told. It wasn’t Ugo’s fault at all.”

“Terrible,” Davide muttered. “And what’s that about his son?”

“I hate to spread gossip, but if you haven’t heard—”

“No, I haven’t heard a thing. What’s the boy’s name?”

“Eh?”

Davide slapped himself in the head. Idiot!

Stasi asked sharply, “Who are you?”

“I forgot for a second. It’s ... Ricardo, of course.”

“Just who is this?” Stasi demanded.

“I told you, a friend.”

“A friend! And you don’t even know Pietro’s name? As if Ugo doesn’t mention him every ten minutes, he’s so proud. You tell me right now who you are!”

Davide hung up. Damn! What an idiotic thing to do. He hadn’t made such a stupid mistake since his first days on the crime beat. And the old fool could have told him everything, everything!

He thought for another moment, then picked up the phone again. “Yes, I want a number in Borgo. Ugo Onesti, I don’t know the address. Onesti. U-g-o. Yes!”

He scribbled, hung up, dialed. The line was busy. He waited a minute, dialed again. Still busy. He waited five minutes. Still busy! And busy again, a half hour later.

He had just twenty minutes left to make his deadline. He tapped his pencil nervously, then picked up the fax again and read it through closely.

Two days ago in Borgo, Caprio Province, a fistfight took place between provincial tax commissioner Ugo Onesti and Roijnan businessman Karl Mitek. The aforesaid Mitek confronted Onesti on the street, claiming that the aforesaid Onesti's eldest son had compromised his daughter. The argument turned violent when Mitek resorted to blows. This rapidly involved the entire neighborhood and the police were forced to intervene. The two disputants were taken into custody along with several others.

Subsequent investigation has revealed that the Roijnan businessman, Karl Mitek, recently contracted to purchase a munitions factory located in Borgo under suspicious circumstances. The former owner, a certain Marcus Dante, is being forced to sell after several reversals of fortune, including the loss of two important clients. Sources hint that Mitek may be implicated in these reversals and others, e.g., clients having canceled orders, complained against the factory's service, or even having threatened lawsuits against the aforesaid Dante. The extent of Mitek's involvement in these matters has not yet been ascertained. There is further concern that the aforesaid Mitek may have suborned a provincial official or officials in return for favorable tax incentives.

The two disputants, the aforesaid Onesti and Mitek, were released soon after their arrest. No charges were pressed.

Davide counted quickly. Just over 200 words, not nearly enough. And too many "aforesaid's". He started typing furiously at his computer. Fifteen minutes later he handed in his story on time and was on his way to a well-deserved alcoholic coffee break.

The *Post* went to press at 4:00. On the third page, below the fold, the following could be found:

Personal Dispute Reveals International Tensions

On Thursday in the eastern town of Borgo, Caprio Province, a fistfight erupted between a Serennian and a Roijnan that may have international consequences. Local tax commissioner Ugo Onesti was accosted by Roijnan businessman Karl Mitek, who accused Onesti's eldest son of compromising his daughter. Mitek attacked, first with words, then with blows. The fight quickly escalated when the hidden hostilities between the neighboring towns of Borgo and Vijnul erupted into a full-blown riot. Police were called to the scene and arrested a number of people, including the two disputants.

Borgo sits on the eastern border upon the Alluva River directly across from the Roijnan town of Vijnul. The two towns have traditionally been seen as models of international cooperation.

Commercially and culturally, the two municipalities enjoy a mutually profitable relationship. But beneath the surface boil centuries of rancor and indignation.

Subsequent investigation has revealed the rank underbelly of modern business dealings. The Roijnan manufacturer Karl Mitek recently contracted to purchase a munitions factory in Borgo under suspicious circumstances. The former owner is being forced to sell after several reversals of fortune, including the loss of two important clients. Other clients have canceled orders, made complaints against the factory's service, or even threatened frivolous lawsuits against the owner. Because of these problems and the imminent prospect of bankruptcy, the owner drastically lowered the effective sales price of his factory. Sig. Mitek's involvement in these matters has not yet been ascertained.

Tension continues in Borgo, where the people are wondering to what extent their peaceful land may have been manipulated by other unscrupulous Roijnans. Roijnan businesses in Borgo are reported to be displaying the Serennian flag prominently in order to defuse anti-Roijnan sentiment.

Many questions remain. Was the attack instigated by Sig. Mitek for purely personal reasons? Or did he have reason to fear that Onesti, a functionary in the tax office, may have come across incriminating evidence of wrongdoing? Did Sig. Mitek's corrupt dealings extend as far as the Director of Taxation, who worked tirelessly to arrange favorable a tax break for the prospective purchaser of the munitions factory? And perhaps most importantly, why should Sig. Mitek, who already owns a profitable appliance factory in Vijnul, want to acquire a munitions manufacturing facility, and in Borgo?

All those arrested in Thursday's riot have been released without charges. Sig. Mitek immediately returned to his homeland where further investigation is pending. Sig. Onesti was discharged from his post immediately following the riot and at press time was not available for comment.

Leo Fazi, editor-in-chief of the weekly *The People's Voice*, tossed the first section of the evening edition of the *Post* across the room to Anna Fadena, who sat at a rickety desk typing on an ancient Adler typewriter. Anna caught the paper and glanced over curiously.

“Take a look at that,” said Fazi.

“Which one?”

“Below the fold. Delsano’s.”

Anna read it quickly. Fazi looked around the little office of *The People’s Voice*: dirty, dimly lit, drafty, just three rooms on the third floor of a warehouse on via Marconi, near the docks. But cheap, next door to a decent delicatessen, and, after more than ten years, comfortable enough.

Anna shrugged. “So? What about it?”

Fazi leaned across the old door balanced on two file cabinets that served as his desk, layout workspace, dining table, conference table, and sometime bed. “Not the content. The style. Read it again.”

She did. “You’re right, it doesn’t sound like Delsano’s usual empty spewing. Sounds more like a government bulletin.” She looked up. “Oh.”

Fazi nodded. “Why should the government want such a story published, and in the *Post*? Why type the Roijnan as a crook? Why isn’t Onesti quoted, or Mitek, or even the police? What’s all this ludicrous talk about ‘international tensions’? I’ve never heard of any troubles with Roijna before.”

“Someone wants tension?”

“That’s what we need to find out.”

Anna shook her head. “I can’t believe Davide would put his name to a government press release.”

Fazi had pulled out a map. “Want to take a little trip?”

She smiled. “Over the mountains?”

“I hear the Alluva is very pretty this time of year.”

“I haven’t been out of town in months. Sure. How far is it?”

Fazi traced a line on the map. “Only 250 kilometers. Not a long drive.”

“I’d rather take the train.”

“You’ll need a car, you’ll be running all over trying to find people who’ll talk. Go to Vijnul, too, check on this Mitek. You’d better start right away, they’re pushing this for some reason.”

“Okay. Oh! Tomorrow’s the Committee’s press conference to announce the findings on Stanco and the by-election.”

Fazi thought a moment. “Fine. You’ll be in Borgo, you can get the local reaction. It’s their member’s head on the chopping block.”

“Bad choice of words,” Anna laughed. “Who’ll cover the conference?”

“I’ll send Samuel.”

“He’s awfully young.”

“Good practice for him. We’ll tape it to be sure he doesn’t miss anything.”

Anna started gathering her things. “I wonder what sort of reaction we’ll stir

up when they find out we're asking questions in Borgo?"

6

ONESTI SAT SLUMPED in his chair in the parlor, making no sound, scarcely breathing. Sunlight shone outside the window: the curtains were drawn, he did not see it. There was noise in the street: the window was shut, he did not hear it. He had never before been unemployed. He had never before known such shame. Never before had his home, his comfortable, happy home, been a prison to him, a place to hide himself from harsh, mocking eyes, of friends, neighbors, everyone, everyone. A clock on the table ticked slowly, marking the endless humiliation that was now his life.

Giuliana watched him from the hallway. She folded her arms and turned away into the kitchen. Her mother sat at the table, an empty coffee cup before her.

“Really, mother,” Giuliana said softly, “I don’t know what to do.”

“He’s had a terrible shock, Giuli’. Two shocks. Stronger men than he would have been knocked out. But your Ugo will come out of it.”

“He won’t come out of it sitting in there staring at the floor.” She sat down across from her mother and touched her own cup. “You know him, Mama. You know how proud he is. Without that job, what will he do? It was his life. And this terrible news about Pietro ...” She dropped her head into her hands. “Mama, I don’t know how I manage to wake up every day.” Tears burned in her eyes.

Sig.ra Sette shook her head firmly. “No! Don’t start crying. This is not your time to cry. Your husband needs every bit of strength in you right now, and your son, too. If you all weep, who will be there to take charge? Giuli’, look at me. Look.” Giuliana looked up. Sig.ra Sette took her hand. “Every family goes through bad times, terrible times, yes, even worse than this. You know that, but you’re not able to see past your hurt now. Remember when your papa died? You were still a baby, only eight years old, remember? You cried and cried. Now, do you remember ever seeing me cry?”

Giuliana thought a moment. “No, Mama, I don’t believe I do.”

“Because I didn’t. Not in front of you. Oh, I cried every night, but only after you were asleep, so that you wouldn’t hear me. You were a child, you had to cry, but I—I had to comfort you when you did. When bad things happen to a family, someone has to be strong. Someone has to take hold of the situation and not weaken. Ugo has been hit hard, harder than he’s ever been hit before. He’s lost his job, he’s lost his self-respect. Pietro has also been hit hard, he’s made a mistake and has also lost his self-respect. They need you to be strong, strong enough for both of them. You understand?”

Giuliana dabbed her eyes with a napkin. "Yes, I understand. But Mama, I've had a terrible shock too, you know. Won't anyone be strong for me?"

Sig.ra Sette came around the table and embraced her daughter. "Darling, darling, I'm right here. You be strong for them, and I'll be strong for you. Come to me when you can't bear another moment. We'll have a good cry together. But," she whispered, "not where they can hear."

Fired. Fired. The word whirled through Onesti's head without cease till it was an unpleasant friction that wore holes in his brain. Fired, fired. But as long as the word whirled, as long as the sound and friction continued, he would not have to think. Would not have to think about having no job. Would not have to think about his son, his son's shame that had brought such shame upon him. Because if he thought about that, he might ... no, better not to think. Fired, fired.

The telephone rang. Onesti did not move. The telephone kept ringing. No one answered; no one in the apartment dared to answer. The telephone had been ringing almost without cease for the last three days. Ugo's hands clutched the arms of the chair to keep from reaching for the telephone. Fired, fired.

In the boys' bedroom, Pietro sat as silent as his father, head in his hands. Every time the telephone rang Pietro started, but he did not dare to find out who was calling. His father was outside, he could not make himself go out there.

Vito had been watching all this for three days. When he passed through the parlor, his father refused to look up. When he entered his bedroom, his brother refused to look up. The telephone rang, again and again, his mother and grandmother talked in whispers, until Vito was ready to scream.

The telephone was ringing yet again. Ringing. Ringing. Finally Vito slammed down the book he was trying to read, jumped up, and stormed into the parlor. He watched his father not answer the telephone.

"That's it!"

He stomped into the kitchen.

"Mama!"

Giuliana jumped in her seat. "Oh, Vito, ssh! You startled me!"

"I will not ssh!" Vito declared. "How long is this going to go on? Papa doesn't move, Pietro doesn't move, we all walk around on tiptoe like someone died. So Pietro knocked up his girlfriend, so what? Things like that happen all the time, Gianni Peronuto did it, they got married, the world didn't come to an end."

Giuliana shook her head. "Vito, dear, you don't understand. It's not so simple."

"Why isn't it simple? I'll tell you why. Because no one's letting it *be* simple!"

"Your father's lost his job—"

Vito paced around the kitchen. “Yeah, yeah, and why? *He* didn’t start the fight, it was that damned Roijnan who started it!”

“Vito,” tsked Sig.ra Sette.

“I’m sorry, Grandmama. But why’d they fire Pa? He should go before the Provincial Council, demand his job back, and if they don’t help him, he should go to the governor!”

Giuliana and her mother stared. In two minutes the boy had said more than they normally heard from him in a week.

“Pietro is crying.” Vito yelled. “He’s *crying*, mama! *You’re* crying! Everyone’s crying except Pa, he just sits there and sits there. Are we all going to sit around in the dark until we starve to death?”

Giuliana thought a moment. Then she pursed her lips, nodded, and stood up. “Good. All right. Fine.” She went out of the kitchen.

Sig.ra Sette watched her go, then smiled at Vito. “Well done, Vito. I never thought you’d be the one to get us moving again.”

Vito, trembling with emotion, managed to grin.

Giuliana came into the parlor, planted herself in front of Ugo, hands on hips, and said, “Ugo. Ugo!”

Onesti did not look up, but winced like a beaten dog.

Giuliana grunted, “Huh!” and marched to boys’ room. She knocked loudly at the door and called, “Pietro! Piet’, come out here now!”

Onesti stared at the floor.

The door opened and Pietro, pale, with red eyes, joints cracking, stepped out. “Mama? What’s wrong?” he whispered.

“Come with me. And stop whispering.”

She led him up to his father. “Ugo!”

Despite himself, Onesti started.

“We’ve all had just about enough of this nonsense. We’re not going to sit in this apartment the rest of our lives without daring to speak a word, you understand? You’ve had three days to come to grips with this. It’s time to stop feeling sorry for ourselves and think of what to do. Do you hear me? Look at me when I’m talking to you, Ugo!” He did not. She turned to Pietro. “Darling, to fix things your father and I must know just exactly what happened.”

Onesti covered his ears.

Giuliana caught his hands and pulled them down. “Oh, no you don’t! We need to know.” She looked back at Pietro. “Go ahead.”

Pietro hung his head. “You know what happened.”

“We must know everything. How deeply are you involved with this girl? How did you meet?”

Pietro looked up, hopeless. He looked down again at the floor. "We met at the bakery," he said, sobs lurking at the back of his throat. "She was visiting from Vijnul with her friends."

"Mm-hmm. What's her name?"

"Elena."

"We know her family name. Elena Mitek. And you liked her."

He shrugged.

"And she liked you."

Pietro made an indeterminate noise.

"Good. So you got to know each other, went through the customary steps, and finally—"

"Mama ..." Pietro groaned. His face shone red.

"No squeamishness, Pietro, it's all too clear. What happened when you found out?"

The boy shrugged. "She cried," he said miserably. "I thought I should give her money, the money papa gave me. So she could ... but I couldn't."

Giuliana said firmly, "We won't discuss that."

"So we planned to go off together ..."

"Go!" Giuliana seized his hands, as if he were trying to run away that very moment. "Why would you think such a thing? Where would you go?"

Pietro shrugged. "We didn't know. We were trying to decide. Maybe to Fricchi, or Kačni in Roijna. I thought if we went to a big city I could find a job."

"Foolish children, no more sense than babies. You don't think we'd turn you out, surely? You're not so silly. You know your papa better than that."

"I was afraid, Mama, we were both afraid, we weren't thinking." He sat down. His hands trembled. "We wanted to leave that night, after my graduation, but we were too afraid. Maybe we *should* have run off. Then none of this would have happened."

"Don't talk like that." She stroked his hair.

"Elena decided she'd tell her father. I thought I should be with her when she told him."

Giuliana nodded. "Very responsible, Pietro. That was a good thing to do."

"But he went crazy! He threatened me, and when Elena stopped him, he stormed off here to have it out with Papa." He began to cry. "Oh, Papa, I'm sorry! I didn't mean for anything like this to happen!"

Onesti said nothing. He did not look up.

Giuliana sighed. "Well, and now?"

Pietro looked up questioning.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Do you love the girl?"

He looked down, embarrassed. He whispered, "Yes."

She smiled. "Good. I'd hoped my boy wouldn't play with girls' hearts. Do you want to marry her?"

He shifted on his feet. "... Maybe ... if she still wants to ..."

Giuliana turned to Onesti. "You hear? Everything quite natural. The boy has good intentions, he loves the girl, he has good reason to believe she loves him. What do you intend to do about it?"

Onesti finally looked up. "Me?"

"Yes, you. Your son needs your help, Ugo. You're his father, you must help him."

Two heads peeked around the doorway.

"Help him," Onesti murmured. "Help him?" He stood up. "Why should I help this boy, eh? Did he help me? Answer me that! How did he help me? I've been fired, or have you forgotten? Me, tax commissioner, fifteen years in the post, ten years to reach that position, and now, because of this boy's lust—"

"Papa!" Pietro covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

"Because of his inability to control himself, because of his refusal to follow the most basic morality, or even to take the most basic precautions, I've been fired!"

Giuliana realized that Onesti was no longer sitting. She moved in front of the chair to block it.

"We face ruin. My family will starve to death, and why? Because he couldn't keep his hands off that girl! Oh, if I'd done this to my father, he would have beaten me to a pulp!"

Giuliana stared. Then she said, without emotion, "All right. All right. Fine. You want to beat him? Go ahead."

"What?"

"Mama!" Pietro gasped.

Giuliana turned to the boy. "Piet', go and find a stick, a good, big stick, so your papa can beat you."

The two gaped at her. She folded her arms and waited.

"Giuli' —"

"No," she interrupted, "you're quite right, you should beat him. That's your prerogative as his father. Son, go, bring the broomstick out of the kitchen, that should work. Or perhaps," she said to Onesti, "you'd prefer to use your fists?"

Onesti regarded his son, who stood at least eighteen centimeters taller than he. Someone was snickering in the corridor.

Onesti grumbled, "Aren't I allowed to be angry, just a little?"

She shook her head and smiled. "No, not any longer. You've been angry long

enough.”

“Damn!” He turned to leave the room, but Vito and Sig.ra Sette appeared in the doorway.

“There’s no more time for such dramatics. Now is the time we decide what to do.” Giuliana touched Onesti’s arm. “First, you and Pietro must forgive each other.”

“Forgive *me!*” Onesti roared. “Why on earth—!”

“If you think for a moment, you’ll know perfectly well why.”

Onesti muttered.

Pietro stepped up to him. “Papa ...”

Onesti clenched his jaw and folded his arms.

“Papa, please. I’m sorry. I never meant to cause you trouble.”

Onesti did not answer. Giuliana punched his shoulder. He huffed and puffed. “Oh, all right, I forgive you.”

A moment’s silence. Giuliana punched him again.

“Damn it! Very well, I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t blame you for my troubles. But I am by God going to blame that idiot Mitek, and I dare you to stop me!” he said to Giuliana.

She smiled.

He turned to his son. “But why didn’t you warn me? If I’d only had some idea what to expect...”

Pietro held out his hand. Onesti looked at it. Giuliana pushed him forward. The father and son shook hands, then embraced.

Applause exploded from the doorway.

“At last!” Vito hollered. “As bad as pulling teeth!” He ran and yanked open the curtains. Sunlight flooded the room. Everyone blinked.

“Congratulations, Giuli’!” said Sig.ra Sette. “Pietro, you have a wonderful mother, and Ugo, even if I do say so myself, I’ve given you a miracle of a wife. Now we’re a family again, thank heaven! I was getting quite bored with the quiet.”

Everyone sat down and looked to Onesti with pleasant, expectant smiles. The clock on the table ticked.

Onesti glanced from one to another. “What?”

Giuliana said patiently, “Go ahead, Ugo. What should we do now?”

Ugo threw up his hands. “I don’t know what to do! How should I know? You’re the miracle! You come up with something!”

“You’re his father, it’s your place.”

Onesti sputtered. “Incredible. Here I am, without a job, and you want me to make everything all right!” He went to the only chair unoccupied, an

uncomfortable, straight-backed chair, and dropped into it. "Leave me alone!"

Giuliana opened her mouth, but Vito leaped out of his seat. "That's bullshit, Pa!" He slapped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry, Grandmama." He sat down again.

Giuliana said severely, "We don't need that kind of talk, Vito. It's not welcome in this house. But the sentiment is appropriate. Ugo, it seems to me that we need to get these two young people together again — at least to talk. You agree?"

Onesti shrugged. "How?"

"Well, let's think. I suppose that her father, that Mitek, isn't going to make it easy for us."

Onesti managed a wry laugh. "Oh, I think that might be right!"

"Any suggestions?"

"There's nothing to suggest. The criminal attacked me. He won't talk to us."

Giuliana shook her head. "This won't get us anywhere, darling. Pietro, dear, have you talked with your Elena since this happened?"

The boy sobbed.

"I suppose that means no."

"The telephone's been ringing off the hook," Vito said, "but nobody would answer. Maybe she's tried to call Pietro. Why did everyone act so afraid?"

"I didn't see you answering any calls," Pietro said.

"I'm just the second son," Vito snarled, "I don't have any rights here."

"Be quiet, both of you," Giuliana said. "Mother, what do you think?"

Sig.ra Sette looked thoughtfully out the window for a long moment. "Well, I'm not at all experienced in international diplomacy, but I would think that if the girl is in fact pregnant, this Mitek will have to give in eventually and talk with us. Then, if she still loves Pietro and wants to marry him ... and why shouldn't she?"

Pietro blushed. Vito snorted.

"If she does," Sig.ra Sette went on, "and she's not too afraid of her father, she'll do the work for us. If she cries half as much as our Pietro, how could the man refuse? If we wait, the girl will come to us. Simple."

Vito slapped the arm of his chair. "Common sense!"

Giuliana frowned. "Maybe. Maybe. But I think sometimes fate needs a kick in the behind." She looked at Onesti.

He stared at her. Then he grimaced, stood, and paced the room. "Great. Great. Simple! I'll just pick up the telephone and call that lunatic. 'Sig. Mitek, this is Ugo Onesti calling, you remember me, the man you slugged in the street? My son loves your daughter, the one he knocked up, and we'd like to invite you to

dinner to talk it over, how about Friday?’ Oh, very simple!”

“Yes, very simple,” Giuliana said. “Call him now.”

Ugo stood silent for a long while. Then his face went purple, his eyes popped out of his head, and with a great, wordless cry, he rushed out of the apartment.

They watched him go. Finally Giuliana said, “Well, at least he’s out of the house.”

Onesti was at the door to the street before he realized what he’d done. The street, where anyone might see him! Oh, the shame! Not only beaten, but fired, without a position, and, because he’d left the house so thoughtlessly, without even any money in his pockets. Such a thing had never happened before, Ugo Onesti outdoors with no money! He cowered in the doorway, half turned to go back upstairs, but the thought of his family sitting there, waiting for him with those demanding expressions on their faces, made him want to vomit.

A rap on the glass of the concierge’s office startled him. “Good afternoon, Sig. Onesti!”

He turned with frightened eyes. “Sig.ra Bertucci!”

The elderly lady smiled perkily. A cat sprang into the window, a fat red tabby. She casually knocked it out of the way. “How are we today? Did you forget something?”

“What? No, no, I didn’t ... I mean, yes, but ...”

“Would you like me to ring upstairs and ask one of the boys to bring whatever it is?”

“No! Thank you!” He hurried out onto the sidewalk as she watched, perplexed.

He hunched his back, drew up his shoulders, sunk his chin into his chest, and in this ungraceful posture scuttled along, he hoped, unnoticed. The people he passed politely pretended not to see the strange gentleman who walked so oddly.

The sunshine almost blinded him. The noise of traffic almost deafened him. The fresh air irritated his nostrils. With each step his panic grew. He looked around hopelessly and saw the familiar door of the Café Ris. Its blessed dim lighting welcomed him, the quiet murmur of its few customers calmed his panic, the stink of its smoky air refreshed him. Here, at least, he might sit for a few minutes without dread.

“Onesti! Ugo!”

Onesti peered into the gloom and recognized Aldo Tretta. The good fellow hurried over and seized Onesti by the hand.

“At last! Where’ve you been? For days I’ve been telephoning, ringing your doorbell, asking everyone where you’d gone off to, and no one knew. Ugo, Ugo,

you had me so worried.”

“Ssh!” Onesti hissed. He drew Tretta into a dark corner. “Sit down, sit down! Quickly, before someone sees us.” He pushed him down into a chair.

The waiter passing by said, “Why, Sig. Onesti! It’s good to see you again. Have you been ill?”

Onesti pulled up his collar. The waiter shrugged and went away.

Tretta leaned forward. “Onesti, where’ve you been all week? Why didn’t you answer the phone? Put your collar down, you look ridiculous.”

Onesti did not turn down his collar. He clutched it tight to his double chin. “Oh, Aldo, it’s been awful! If I were a weaker man, if I didn’t have my family to worry about, I don’t know what I might have done. I wish I were dead.”

Tretta drew back. “What a thing to say! But Ugo,” he reached to take Onesti’s fidgeting hand in his, “if you really feel that way, why didn’t you call me? Me, your best and closest friend? That’s really too bad of you.”

Ugo sagged wearily. “I’m sorry, Aldo. What can I say? I’ve been crazy, that’s all, crazy plain and simple, I’ve been out of my mind. After that horrible, horrible day ...”

Two men had entered the café and sat down nearby. After they’d ordered two coffees, one turned to the other and whispered, “Hey, look over there. Isn’t that the Onesti fellow?”

Onesti shuddered violently.

The other whispered, “I don’t know. You think so?”

The two stared for a moment. Onesti, frantic, suddenly turned and stuck out his tongue. They smiled in a friendly way, nodded respectfully, and returned to their conversation.

Tretta said, “Ugo, I don’t understand this at all. What’s going on? Why are you acting so strangely?”

“You sound like my family,” Onesti hissed. “Didn’t you see those two? Whispering about me! Oh, dear God, I don’t know how I’ll ever bear such shame. Me, Ugo Onesti, a subject of gossip!”

“Well, of course they—”

“‘Of course’? ‘Of course,’ he says! I’m ruined, Tretta, don’t you understand that? Absolutely ruined. My friends and neighbors are ashamed of me, my family made laughingstocks, and then to be fired from my post ...”

The waiter reappeared and placed two glasses and a bottle of cognac on the table. Onesti started up wildly. “We didn’t order anything! I don’t have any—”

“Compliments of the house, Sig. Onesti,” the waiter said. He bowed and turned away.

“What?” Onesti stared. “What does he mean, compliments?”

Tretta looked at the label. "Godet. Good stuff." He uncorked the bottle.

"Don't do that! We can't ..." He dropped his voice to a harsh whisper. "I don't have any money on me."

"It's on the house, Onesti, didn't you hear?" He filled the two glasses.

"Why in the world ... ?"

Tretta raised his glass. "Here you go. To our hero!" He took a large swallow and smacked his lips. "God, that's fine."

Onesti gaped at him.

"Well? Drink up."

Onesti closed his eyes a moment. With an air of divine patience, he said quietly, "Aldo. Tell me. Why should the waiter bring us cognac? And what the hell do you mean calling me a hero?"

"But Onesti, we're just congratulating you."

"For what?"

Tretta stared. "What do you mean, for what?"

"Aldo!"

Tretta's mouth fell open. "You really don't know."

Onesti almost screamed. "Know what? I don't know anything anymore!"

Tretta hollered out, "Oberto! Bring us a paper. Any one will do."

The waiter hurried over with the morning edition of the *National Post*. He smiled and bowed to Onesti again. Onesti trembled.

"All right now." Tretta flipped through the pages. "There's bound to be something ... ha!" He pointed at the page. "There. Read!"

Onesti, mystified, read. The article Tretta pointed to was headlined, **New Developments in Mitek Affair.**

"Affair?" Onesti said. "There's a Mitek affair?"

Further misdeeds have come to light in the affairs of Karl Mitek, the Roijnan manufacturer who attempted to purchase a Serennian munitions factory and attacked the Borgo tax commissioner Ugo Onesti. Firm evidence has been discovered that Mitek bribed clients of the munitions factory to make complaints and cancel orders so as to force the owner to sell. These discoveries have led to accusations between Serenno and Roijna. It is suggested that at least one Serennian functionary accepted bribes to expedite the sale, but Mitek denies that Sig. Onesti was involved in any way and continues to assert that his quarrel with Sig. Onesti was of a purely personal nature. However, this reporter has learned through colleagues of Sig. Onesti within the Department of Taxation that Mitek

actually attempted to bribe Sig. Onesti, and it was Sig. Onesti's refusal and his threat to go to the authorities that led to the altercation that precipitated this investigation. If true, this journal salutes Sig. Onesti's honesty, courage, and unyielding scruples, so rare in these troubled times.

Onesti sat back, mouth open, eyes wide. His fluttering fingers seized his glass and raised it up. He drank the expensive cognac without tasting it. Then he somehow focused on Tretta.

"Aldo, tell me."

"Mm?"

"Have I really gone off my nut?"

Tretta laughed. "You're always so dramatic, Ugo. Why are you acting like this? Why are you carrying on like a booby? Because of you a criminal was caught and the whole scandal thrown open. You're a hero."

"Hero ..." His head was spinning, he couldn't take a decent breath. "But I don't understand. Mitek never tried to bribe me. He's mad because Pietro got his girl pregnant!"

"Really?" Tretta shrugged. "Well, so what? It's still because of you that crook was found out."

"I'd only learned about the sale that morning, from the Chancellor. And Stasi. Stasi!" He quickly read the article again. "'Through colleagues,' it says. Do you think Stasi's been making up stories? It'd be just like him."

Tretta refilled their glasses. "It doesn't matter. The criminal's discovered, they'll put him in prison, he'll never pull such stunts again."

"Prison!" Onesti moaned. Pietro! How could Pietro and this girl — what was her name? Elena — how could they ever get together if her father was to be thrown into prison? Pietro would certainly start bawling again when he found out.

A finger tapped his shoulder. Onesti shrieked.

"So sorry I startled you. Sig. Onesti?"

A woman stood beside him.

"What do you want! Who are you? Leave me alone!"

The woman blinked at him, but sat down uninvited and placed her shoulder bag on the table. "You are Sig. Onesti, aren't you? I'm glad to finally meet you, I've been looking everywhere for you the last couple of days. Sorry." She extended her hand. "I'm Anna Fadena, reporter for *The People's Voice*. May I buy you a coffee? Oh, I see you already have cognac. Hm, Godet, very nice."

The two men stared at her. Tretta said politely, "Let me get a glass for you."

"No, thank you, I'm on duty. Now, Sig. Onesti—"

“What do you want?” Onesti said fearfully. “You’re a reporter? Why were you looking for me?”

“Because of the Mitek affair, naturally.”

“I don’t know anything!”

“Calm down, Sig. Onesti. I don’t mean to upset you. But I’ve already spoken with Sig. Mitek in Vijnul, he told me all about your son and his daughter.”

Onesti groaned, “Oh God ...”

Anna smiled comfortingly. “Don’t worry, I’m not interested in that particularly. *The People’s Voice* is no scandal sheet. But you’re aware of the wild allegations the radio, television, and especially the *Post* keep repeating. I want to sort out what’s true and what isn’t. You’d like the public to know the truth of the matter, wouldn’t you?”

Onesti refilled his glass, drank, then looked at Anna. He put his hands together to try to still their shaking. “I just don’t understand any of this. Why should you care what I say? My whole life I’ve lived quietly and only done what I was supposed to. No one’s ever noticed me before. Why is everyone talking about me? Why do people stare at me?” His voice rose with mounting hysteria. “What did I do wrong? Why did this happen to me!”

Anna had pulled a notebook, pencil, and small recorder out of her bag. “I’m not the person to answer deep, philosophical questions like that, Sig. Onesti. Men have been trying to come up with answers to such questions for centuries. But what I can do is promise you that I’ll sort out the facts and get to the bottom of things. I can promise that if you’ll cooperate, I will publish just what you tell me, word for word. Why Davide — I mean, the *Post* — insists on publishing speculation about all this we can’t quite figure out. But it doesn’t matter. The only way to counter such fluff is with the truth. You know the truth. So, Sig. Onesti, I’m all ears. Tell me everything.”

“And you’ll print what I tell you?”

“Certainly.”

“No making up nasty insinuations?”

She smiled. “That’s not my style.” She waited, pencil poised.

In one breath Onesti blurted, “I was just starting to have my lunch and my doorbell rang and I said to my wife No, I’ll get it and I spilled some wine on my shirt and I went down to the door and that crazy Mitek was there hollering and screaming and he threw a punch and then I threw a punch back at him and the next thing I know there were policemen everywhere and a judge wanted us to pay fines but he threw out the case with a warning and then my supervisor called and fired me.”

Anna cocked her head. “I see.” She put down her pencil and rubbed her eyes.

“Well, now we have the broad overview, let’s go back to the beginning and focus in on some details. Quietly, and slowly, and calmly.” She picked up her pencil again. “I have all the time in the world.”

And so Onesti told her, quietly and slowly, and by the end of his recitation he was calm again. Anna closed her notebook, clicked off the recorder, and put them away in her bag. “Very good. It’s all quite clear to me, Sig. Onesti. This rumor of bribery obviously has nothing to do with you, anyone with eyes to see would understand that. As I said, I spoke to Sig. Mitek in jail, and what he said confirms your story. He’s a very angry man, that Mitek. I can’t print most of what he had to say about you, the police, his lawyer, the judge, our country, Europe, the earth, and the universe in general. I’m surprised he hasn’t exploded in a yellow cloud of bile.”

“Oh, this is terrible,” Onesti said. “My boy loves his daughter. If Mitek’s really like that, what will we do about Pietro?”

“His daughter does seem an unhappy child. Yes, I interviewed her, too. And her mother. You weren’t available, I had to fill my time somehow. I think you should telephone them. Mitek can’t stop you talking to the poor girl forever. Sooner or later he’s got to go to sleep.” She stood. “Well, I have to run.”

“You’ll publish what I told you?”

“On the front page.”

“The front page!”

“Of course, the *Voice* doesn’t have the kind of circulation that the *Post* enjoys. But we’ll get the truth out, don’t you worry.”

Onesti nodded. “Thanks. Thank you, Sig.ra Fadena.”

“Goodbye, Sig. Onesti, Sig. Tretta. It’s been a real pleasure.” She turned to go, then stopped. “Really, try not to worry. These misunderstandings happen all the time. Sometimes the media like to run with any sensational story they find, it’s more important to them to sell papers than to get their facts straight. Right now you’re the story, but in a week or two they’ll be onto something else and this will all be forgotten. Here’s my card. If you remember anything else you think might be of interest, please call. Or if I can help you in any way. I’ll do whatever I can. Goodbye,” she said, and left.

Onesti looked at the card. *The People’s Voice*. A liberal paper. He had never read it. But the reporter was very nice, she’d really listened to him. He sighed.

“You look tired, Ugo,” Tretta said. “Come on, let’s head home.”

Onesti nodded. “Yes. It’s time to go ... home.” He stood and shuffled to the door. “Oh, I don’t know what I’m going to tell Piet’. Poor boy!”

Nothing happened during the short walk home, except that several people greeted and congratulated Onesti. Onesti began to feel less and less despairing,

more and more elated. By the time he reached his door, he was almost strutting. Even if they were congratulating him for the wrong reasons, it still felt good.

Onesti shook Tretta's hand. "Thanks, Aldo. You're a real friend. I would have gone right round the bend if it weren't for you."

"Nonsense, Ugo," Tretta said, rather embarrassed and very hearty. "You're too level-headed for that. You'll be mayor before too long."

Onesti chuckled. "You're an old fool. But not so big a fool as I."

They embraced and Tretta left him. Onesti looked up at his window, sighed, and went in. He nodded to Sig. Bertucci, who, offended by his precipitate departure earlier, sniffed and cooed at one of her cats.

When he quietly and shyly entered the apartment, Giuliana ran up to him from the living room. "Ugo! There you are! I was starting to worry. Oh, you smell of cognac."

Onesti kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry, darling. I had planned to lose my mind, but I ran into Tretta instead and I'm much better now. You won't believe what's going on out there."

"You won't believe what's going on in here, either," Giuliana said, excited. "Who do you think called just after you left?"

A tremor of fear shook him, but he suppressed it. "I don't know, who?" He sat at the kitchen table.

"Look!" She handed him a slip of paper.

Onesti read. "What? The chief?"

"Yes, the chief. He said he's been trying to reach you all this time, but of course we weren't answering. He wants you back at the office!"

"Ha!"

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "Oh, Ugo, it's so wonderful!"

"I must call him right away." He stood and went to the telephone.

"Everything's going to turn out fine now," Giuliana said. "The telephone hasn't stopped ringing. Gerda called, and Dino. But most of the calls were for you. Ugo, think of it, a reporter from the *Post* called, he wants to interview you by telephone!"

Onesti had started to dial, but stopped. "The *Post*! No. No! They're not getting their hands on me."

Giuliana looked surprised. "What? Whyever not?"

"Don't you worry, I'm not going to talk to those vultures."

Giuliana shrugged. "And there was another call, from a Sig. Galli."

"Who?" Onesti started to dial again.

"Alberto Galli. He didn't say what it was about, but he insisted you call him

back the minute you came in. Says it's very important." She handed him another slip of paper.

Onesti looked at the slip. "Galli? Sounds familiar. But I can't think ...Hello, Sig. Lavolini? Yes, yes, Onesti here. Thank you! Thank you for calling. Yes . . . Yes, I'm so sorry about that. Very disagreeable, certainly, the whole matter, you can't imagine. But really, just a misunderstanding ..."

Giuliana watched Onesti with a tender smile. His color was back, his voice was firm, his thumb had crept into his vest pocket. Her husband had returned.

ANGELICA BOSCO GLIDED in her chair between desk and file cabinet, the receiver of the telephone wedged under her ear. "Yes, sir," she almost sang, "I have that information. The presentation will be on 19 July at two o'clock. It's nothing, happy to be of service. Goodbye." She closed the file drawer, rolled back to her desk, and hung up the phone. She spun around to her computer and had typed just three words when the telephone rang again. "Office of the President, how may I help you? Yes, Sig. Cianelli. Certainly, hold just a moment." She turned back to her computer, click click clicked, and said, "The Hotel Giorgio. Only appetizers, I'm afraid. My pleasure. Thank you. Goodbye." Humming, she started typing again.

The office of the president's secretary was a small, neat room with a desk, a chair on wheels, a regular chair for guests, three file cabinets, a fax machine (seldom used), and a small bookcase squeezed between the door that led to the corridor and the door that opened into the President's office. The bookcase held a dictionary, a guide to etiquette, and an untouched, out-of-date set of volumes containing the published laws of the land. On one wall hung a yellowed map of Serenno printed in 1938. Above her desk, where she could see them whenever she looked up, hung two photographic portraits: one of the first president of the republic, Guglielmo Tetrizzi, gravely elegant with long white mustaches and long white eyebrows, dressed in a high collar and cravat; the other of Bobo Zanni, dressed in a plain blue suit and striped necktie, with the scribbled autograph, "To Angelica Bosco, ever at my right hand." Whenever she looked up at that picture, Angelica felt a burst of confidence. She looked up at it often.

Before she had typed a full sentence, the door opened and Pucci entered. Angelica smiled. "Good morning, Sig. Pucci. Isn't it a lovely day!"

"Is it?" Pucci said.

Angelica instantly lost her smile. "I beg your pardon."

"He's busy?"

She glanced at the buttons on her phone. "He's not on the phone."

Pucci said nothing. He knocked on the President's door twice and walked in. Angelica gazed blankly at her computer screen.

The President's office was a big room, but not too big: republics tend not to spoil their functionaries, and despite this being the highest office in the land, the President was after all just another functionary. But the room was beautifully appointed, the walls half-paneled in black oak and covered above with damask

cloth. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, small, but the prisms were real crystal, not cut glass. The carpet was Uzbeki, worn, of great value. The only furniture was four chairs arranged in a semicircle before a big desk of antique oak carved in complicated symbols whose significance had been long forgotten. Behind the desk hung the green and gold flag of the nation.

Pucci found the President gazing dreamily out the window, a finger up one nostril. Zanni noticed Pucci, smiled, and removed the finger. "Morning, Pucci!" he said. "What a really glorious morning, eh?" He looked back out the window. "Did you ever see such a fine day? Look there — the sun's shining, the sky is blue, people are walking up and down in the street, everyone's happy, everyone's content. What could be better? It's times like this that make you realize what life really ought to be. Not all the strife and toil, worry and strain we put ourselves through. Simple enjoyment. That's the main thing."

Pucci sat heavily in a chair and did not answer.

The President sensed a ripple in his fantasy world. He looked at Pucci suspiciously. "What?"

Pucci puffed out his fat cheeks and blew a gust of mint-scented wind. "Problem."

Zanni deflated. His eyes closed. He said, with something like dread, "Go on."

Pucci shifted in the chair, which was too small for his posterior. "Did you hear the news from Roijna?"

"No ..."

"They've dropped the Mitek affair. Last night."

The President sighed. "Oh? Is that all?"

"Is that all?" Pucci said. "They've dropped all charges against him. Complete exoneration. They've found no evidence to support our accusations. He has officially done nothing illegal."

Zanni. "So?"

Pucci shut his eyes and opened them again. "I'll explain. Mitek is free. This means the distraction's over. There are still six weeks before the by-election."

"Mm."

"And Stanco's trial starts tomorrow."

A long silence followed. The President again looked out the window. Clouds threatened the horizon. The passersby were scowling at one another and regarded the Federal Palace with hate-filled, envious eyes.

Zanni slammed his fist down on the desk. "Damn!"

"Precisely."

Pucci waited quietly while Zanni ranted around the room for several minutes, then interrupted. "Are you finished yet?"

Zanni glared at Pucci, unaccustomed to being spoken to so directly.

"Are you finished?" Pucci repeated calmly.

Zanni, nonplussed, said nothing.

"There's more," Pucci said.

Zanni stumbled back into his chair.

"Kecal prepared a statement this morning. He declares he's happy these baseless charges have been thrown out. He hopes that, in future, governments will act more responsibly before making serious accusations against a foreign national."

"Damn!"

Pucci put his fingers together. "It will be released in an hour. I got it early, through our sources in Kačni. The television and radio stations will have it soon, they'll broadcast it immediately, and the papers will publish it this afternoon. You can imagine how they'll play this up, right before Stanco's trial starts."

Zanni thought. "No. I can't."

Pucci winced. "They'll say we stirred up this Mitek trouble just to distract the people from the Stanco trial."

"But we did."

"But we can't let anyone know that."

"Oh."

"This is not good."

"Not good?"

"No. Not good."

"It's only a statement!" Zanni cried. "It means nothing. I make statements all the time, no one pays any attention to them. Why should we respond to it at all? Let's ignore it. Yes," he said, "we'll ignore it. If we ignore it, the people will forget it immediately," he added with eager desperation.

"They forget what we want them to forget. And remember what we want them to remember."

Zanni sagged. "What should I do?"

"You have to announce it yourself."

"What! Me? In God's name, why?"

"Because if we announce it first, we can decide the way the press will play it. You'll say that Roijna has offended Serenno. They've called us liars, deliberately ignored our just complaints."

Zanni thought for a moment. "I see. All right. But isn't it too late? You said the television and radio stations will have it soon."

Pucci stood. "I've already arranged everything." He looked at his watch. "The reporters will be here in ten minutes."

“Ten minutes? Angelica!”

Angelica entered immediately, pad and pencil in hand.

“Reporters are coming, where’s my jacket? How’s my hair? Pucci, what should I say?”

Pucci pulled from his pocket two sheets of paper and handed them to the President.

Angelica found the President’s jacket. “Your hair’s perfect, don’t worry.”

“Check the office, make sure nothing important is visible,” Zanni said, reading. “Pucci, what’s this word? ‘Notorious’?”

“I’ll type it for you,” Angelica said.

“No time, let me read.” His lips moved as he read.

Pucci pointed. “Stress this line. ‘We will not suffer, we will not tolerate this insult,’ here, you see?”

“Yes yes yes yes yes, let me read! Angelica, guard the door, don’t let anyone in till I signal.” She ran out. “Pucci, you ass, why didn’t you warn me? And why are we doing this in my office?”

“The office is more official, shows we’re serious. And doesn’t hold so many reporters. Remember, be dignified. Solemn. God is on our side. You’ve been insulted, but you’re the bigger man....”

Angelica shut the door behind her and caught her breath. Every other minute a crisis! Sometimes, often, she considered resigning. But the President, how would he react? For more than a year she’d been working with him, under him, near him. She had no illusions about herself. She knew she was a mediocre secretary. But even the mediocre have their talents, and hers was dealing with the childish, bullying, self-centered, self-satisfied president of the country. What more important job could there be than helping the leader of the nation appear like a leader? To bring him coffee, make sure his hair was in place, and smooth as many bumps from his road as possible?

She looked quickly at herself in the mirror she kept in the top drawer of her desk. Her hair was a mess, as if she had walked through a hurricane. Which, of course, she had.

A rumble of sound came from the corridor. Angelica slapped her hair into place, smoothed her skirt, and went to the door. A crowd of reporters filled the corridor with microphones, television cameras. “Yes, gentlemen, please wait two minutes, the President is just finishing an important telephone conference.”

“Who’s he talking to?” someone shouted.

“Is it Kecal?”

“What’s this all about?”

“Yeah, what’s with the impromptu show?”

She was trying to think of something innocuous to say when the President’s door opened and Pucci appeared, filling the frame from edge to edge.

Angelica breathed with relief. “The President will see you now.”

The reporters filed into the office and lined themselves along the walls. Zanni sat looking serious at his desk, pretending to review important documents. The television cameramen prepared their equipment. The radio reporters checked sound levels. Pucci slipped among them, whispered to this one, that one, ensured that the cameras caught Zanni from his good side. He nodded to Davide Delsano, who stood right in front of the President’s desk. Delsano smiled and made a small, barely noticeable bow.

Bright lights flashed on, outshining the sun. Zanni did not flinch. Pucci stepped back beside Angelica at the connecting door to her office. Someone signaled, the chatter subsided, and Zanni looked gravely up into the cameras.

“Serenno, I come before you today with disturbing news, news that will sadden the heart of every true patriot. You are all aware that evidence was recently uncovered leading us to believe a Roijnan manufacturer, with the help, I regret to say, of a few unscrupulous Serennians, has subverted our constitutional procedures and worked to enrich himself at public expense by undermining a stable Serennian business. Through the courageous efforts of a heroic provincial tax commissioner, this crime was brought to light and the Roijnan was charged through the appropriate legal channels. According to established legal precedent and international law, the Roijnan was remanded to his own country to face justice.

“My good friends, I regret to announce that I have just received a call from the Roijnan state department informing me that this criminal, Karl Mitek, has been freed. The Roijnan government has refused to acknowledge the overwhelming evidence of his wrongdoing, refused to prosecute the case, and, to add insult to injury, has demanded that Serenno apologize for accusing one of its citizens.

“My dear friends, I come before you so that you can hear firsthand the answer Serenno makes to this gross offense: We will not suffer, we will not tolerate such an insult. We will not surrender to injustice, an injustice that has injured one of our own. We will not rest until this criminal is brought to trial and the good name of our fair land is restored to honor in the community of nations.

“People of Serenno, this is our answer. I thank you for your time.”

Angelica raised her hands to applaud this stirring oration, but Pucci caught her hand and shook his head sharply.

The reporters stared at one another for a moment. Then the questions

exploded.

“Sig. President!” “President Zanni!” “What do you mean by—” Do you mean to imply—” “Sig. President!”

But President Zanni, in perfect silence and with perfect dignity, stood, strode through the crowd, and — as Angelica and Pucci hurriedly opened the door — left the room. The two pushed after him and slammed the door shut. A terrible cacophony erupted in the office.

Zanni looked at Pucci. “How’d I do?”

“Perfect.”

“Sig. President,” Angelica gasped, “you were wonderful! It’s so exciting! I was ready to march to the battlements—”

Zanni frowned. “Pucci, you know, reading this out loud just now, it sounded almost threatening, don’t you think? We aren’t making any threats, are we?”

“No, of course not, Sig. President,” Pucci said. “It’s just a distraction, don’t worry. Those fools will talk about nothing except your speech for days, with luck we can keep this going till after the by-election, and ...” He stopped. “Why am I shouting?” He scowled at the noise coming through the door. “Angelica, get in there and kick those dogs out. But,” he added, “politely.”

Angelica gazed at him in panic. “Me?”

“Yes, go, go,” he said.

Angelica tried to quell the nausea that leaped in her throat. She went to the door, took a deep breath, opened it, and slid through.

The reporters surrounded her before the door had closed behind her.

“Where is he?”

“He makes a statement like that and disappears?”

“What are we supposed to do with that?”

“What’s he up to?”

“Is he going to declare war?”

“Gentlemen!” Angelica cried. “He’s not ... it doesn’t ... I mean ...”

“Where is he?” someone shouted again.

Angelica swallowed. “The President is ... he’s quite busy ... I’m afraid he’s wanted elsewhere. That’s all I can say ...”

“Good God, he *is* starting a war!”

“No! We’ll have copies of the President’s statement for you in less than an hour. Now, if you’ll come with me, I’ll show you out.”

She tried to squeeze through the crowd, but they would not move until Davide Delsano stepped up and cleared a path for her. She thanked him with a strained smile and went to the hallway door. “Gentlemen, good day.”

The reporters kept gabbling. She only pointed to the open door. Finally they

filed out.

“She knows how to keep her trap shut, doesn’t she?”

“What attitude!”

“Zanni’s getting too big for his britches, that’s for sure.”

“It’s a free country, and that Zanni treats us like children!”

“Not answering questions! Who does he think he is, the President of the United States?”

Angelica listened to these remarks and felt her stomach churn. She’d never imagined such disrespect in her life. What was worse, it almost seemed justified.

A cameraman hauled his equipment past her. “Well, anyway, we got some good film,” he wheezed.

Davide Delsano was the last to exit the room. He nodded to Angelica and said, “Thanks, Signorina.”

Surprised, Angelica stuttered, “Oh, thank you!”

Davide smiled. “No easy job, dealing with us in a pack, is it?”

Angelica said, “Really, you know, it’s not so ...”

“Just try to understand, we’re not all impolite slobs. Good morning.” He went out.

Angelica noticed her heart was beating painfully. She closed the door and leaned against it, panting.

The television stations broadcast the President’s statement during the lunch-hour news, so few people saw it. The radio stations broadcast it at the same time, but most of those who still listened to radio preferred music with their lunch, so few heard it. The newspapers published it in their evening editions, and that’s how most people finally learned the fearful tidings.

At *The People’s Voice*, Anna Fadena hurled the *Post* at the wall. “That son of a—!” she spat.

Leo Fazi looked up, mildly curious. “Hm?”

“What game is he playing? Of course Mitek is pretty much innocent, I prove that in my article! A child could see it, if he took the trouble to think about it for two minutes straight. Now that idiot’s acting like he’s going to invade Roijna!”

But *The People’s Voice* was published only weekly, and when Anna’s article appeared three days later, no one noticed. All that the papers printed, all that the newscasters spoke of was national honor, national shame, and Roijnan rascality. Within a week, so did the populace.

The *Post* noted the commencement of the Stanco trial in a brief two-paragraph story on an inside column on page five.

8

SIG.RA BASSANO'S BAKERY is on via Eco, across from a statue of General Ludovico Leopardi seated on a beautiful horse. The General had fought against Napoleon for a few days during Napoleon's march to Rome, escaped the massacre of his troops, and wound up as a representative at the Congress of Vienna, where he ceded a third of Serenno's small territory to Venice at Metternich's wry insistence. The General's statue stood in Borgo because he had been born there, and the Borganese had been proud that any native son had done anything at all noted by history. Currently, no one remembered precisely who Leopardi was or what he had done, and the monument had become just another statue in just another square, a convenient roosting place for pigeons, who had covered it with a tatted mantle of white. The horse had lost a bronze hoof, the General had lost a bronze finger, and the pedestal canted queasily to the north. Thus the standard lesson regarding fame.

Pietro huddled behind the bronze horse, adroitly avoiding the pigeons' benedictions. He had been standing there several hours every day for more than a week now, with a miserable expression that wounded the heart of everyone who happened to notice him. It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon, and despite his sense of commitment, he was hungry, still damp from that morning's drizzle, and wanted to go home. Just another five minutes, he thought, if not by then... But love pays no heed to clocks, and ten minutes trickled by before he turned away to go home and finally saw her.

Elena did not see Pietro immediately, and he felt a voyeuristic thrill watching his lover unseen. Her brown hair looked auburn in the late afternoon sunlight. Her complexion appeared a pure, breathtaking white. She walked carefully, as if every step worried her, and he saw that she was trying to hide her already swelling abdomen. He could restrain himself no longer. He ran forward and cried out, "Hey! Elena!"

She saw him and — though it was certainly just a trick of the light — her white skin turned rosy, her gray eyes shone beaming blue. She was the embodiment of youthful feminine beauty.

"Pietro!"

They ran to each other. Then their adolescence stopped them. They looked at the sky, each other, the ground, each other, the statue, each other.

Elena, the more practical of the two, finally took his hand. He blushed, pulled her behind the statue, and kissed her, first shyly, then deeply. The kiss gave him

strength; he felt, for the first time since that terrible day of the riot, a great peace. Everything was right, at least for this moment.

He touched her belly. She smiled. "Ours," he whispered. He couldn't say anything else. They kissed, again and again, little kisses, finding the way back to each other.

Finally he took a breath and said, "How are you? Oh, Elena."

She said, "Fine." Then she shook her head. "No, I'm not. Papa's always in a bad mood, Mama's always crying, it's terrible." She smiled. "How are you?"

"Better, now."

She played with a frown but decided against it. "Why haven't you called? You're awful."

"I did call, but your father always ... I couldn't say anything. I just hung up."

She nodded. "I knew it was you. Papa never lets me answer the phone, he's so angry. Imagine, my father hauled in by the police!"

"Mine, too!"

They laughed.

"We shouldn't laugh," Elena said.

"No." He pulled her closer and kissed her again. "How did you get away? I've been waiting every day here, hoping."

"I told Mama that I had to get out of the house or I'd go crazy and she didn't say no, so here I am. Did your father lock you up? You couldn't come to see me?"

"And have your father shoot me?"

She laughed. "He doesn't own a gun. At least, I don't think he does."

"Oh!" He caressed her back. "You want me to die for you."

"It would be very romantic."

"For you. Not so romantic for me." He drew her away from the statue. "Come on, let's go inside."

"Where? The bakery?"

"Yes."

"What about your friends?"

"Sig.ra Bassano will let us sit in the back, by the ovens. It'll be private."

She went with him. Pietro stepped in first, to see if anyone he knew was there. There were two old women and a small child pressing her nose against the glass case where the cakes were displayed. Sig.ra Bassano was listening to the two women complain about the high price of eggs and olive oil. When she noticed Pietro she smiled, but when she saw Elena standing behind him outside the door, her smile faded. Pietro gestured toward the back of the shop, Sig.ra Bassano glanced about, nodded. Pietro went back out.

“Come on,” he said, and led Elena around the corner.

The back of the bakery held the big ovens and two long tables where Sig.ra Bassano and her employees kneaded the dough and cut out the pastries. Along one wall were towers of bins filled with various flours, nuts, seeds, and spices. The room was spotless, but the air was foggy with flour dust. The smell of something chocolate baking made their mouths water.

Sig.ra Bassano came through the door, calling, “I’ll have them tomorrow for sure, Sig.ra Urigano, come around three, they’ll be fresh out of the oven. Goodbye, ladies, goodbye.” She squinted through the dusty air and saw the two young lovers. “So here you are. I’ve been worrying when I might see you again, Elena.” She hugged the girl. “Oh, look at you!” She pulled Elena’s hands out and studied her closely. “How lovely! Your delicate condition suits you, you poor thing.”

Elena blushed.

“And you, Pietro, you look like a real grown-up. But really, my dears, you’re being very imprudent.”

Pietro said, “I’m sorry, but we had to meet somewhere. I thought you’d—”

“Oh, it’s not that, love, better here than out on the street. Believe me, I’m always happy to see you. But you need to be careful. If anyone recognized you ...”

“That’s why we came here,” Elena said. “If Papa found out—”

Sig.ra Bassano peered out a window. “It’s not your father I’m worried about.”

Elena frowned, puzzled. “What is it, Sig.ra Bassano?”

Sig.ra Bassano stared at them. “They don’t understand, my goodness,” she muttered. “Oblivious! Well, that’s love for you. Don’t you realize what’s going on?”

Elena covered her stomach with both hands. Tears filled her eyes.

“Oh, don’t cry, love, don’t cry, here, sit down.” She dusted a bench with her apron. “I’m not talking about that. Honestly, don’t you know how the papers are stirring things up?”

Pietro and Elena sat down beside Sig.ra Bassano. They clutched one another’s hands.

“Maybe I worry too much, but I’m afraid ...” She forced a smile. “Well, let’s forget it. For now. Elena, love, tell me how you’re doing. You look wonderfully healthy.”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Elena said. “I haven’t been sick, not a minute. Mama says she was sick the whole time she was pregnant with me, but I haven’t been at all. Not yet, anyway.”

“Good. The child is obviously meant to be. So what do you intend to do?”

Pietro and Elena looked at one another.

“You haven’t thought it out yet, eh?” Sig.ra Bassano smiled. “You really are still children. But obviously you’re past childhood, my loves.” She patted Elena’s stomach. “Well past it. You’re evidently planning to keep the baby?”

Elena looked confused. “Of course!” She hadn’t considered any alternative. Now she thought for a moment and nodded. “Yes.” She looked at Pietro, who waited anxiously. “Yes,” she said again, firmly. “It’s ours.”

Pietro, who had considered alternatives, breathed deeply.

“Good,” Sig.ra Bassano said. “Well, the next step is to decide how you two—”

The bell rang in the shop. Sig.ra Bassano gave an irritable shake of her head. “Oh, another customer. Barbara’s out, I’m alone, excuse me, my loves, I have to.” She hurried back into the shop.

Elena and Pietro looked at the floor. The future stared up at them, with all its decisions to be made and responsibilities to be shouldered, inevitable, unavoidable.

Pietro glanced at Elena. Her lovely face was pale. Her head hung down. She looked like an image in an ancient icon and it pricked his heart. If the future stared him in the face, well, after all, it needn’t terrify him. Men had faced such a future for a million years, and women too, and somehow the human race had survived. So.

He rubbed her hand, opened his mouth, tried to speak, swallowed, and tried again. “Elena.”

She didn’t look up.

“Elena, do you think maybe ...you know ...well, maybe we should get married.”

She still did not look up. His heart fell. “Elena?”

He saw she had begun to cry. She said softly, “Do you really want to? Because if you don’t want to, it’s okay... .”

“But do you want to?”

“Only if you want to.”

“But only if you want to.”

She said nothing.

“Elena! Don’t you want to marry me?”

She looked up. “Yes, I do, but only if you—”

He stopped her with a kiss.

They sat quietly together, listening to Sig.ra Bassano sell two sweet rolls to a rather deaf man who couldn’t decide between apricot and prune. He finally decided to take one of each.

Pietro said, "So what should we do now?"

Elena shrugged. "Papa's very angry. He won't ever let me marry you."

"Why does he hate me so much?" Pietro growled. "No, I haven't forgotten, but he's got to come around sometime."

"It's not just about me. Us. He was in jail, Pietro. They accused him of crimes."

"My father was in jail too, but he doesn't want your father dead. I don't think," he added.

"He'll give in eventually, I suppose. But for now ..."

"All right," Pietro said. "We'll have to get married secretly."

A delicious thrill of adventure filled them both. Elena giggled. "Like a movie."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"I don't know. Papa will be even more angry if we do. He might have a stroke."

That did not seem so fearful to Pietro, but he kept that to himself. "He doesn't have anything to do with this. We need to get married, and so we will. If we have to, we'll run away."

She sighed. "We've been through this before. Where would we go? I don't know anyone outside of Vijnul. Can you think of any place?"

"No. I have an aunt in Fricchi, but she probably wouldn't take us in without telling."

"And we don't have any money."

"No, just the little I've saved. It's not much." He bit his lip. "But we have to get married."

"So how?"

Pietro thought a moment. "In Serenno you have to be eighteen to get married without your parents' consent."

"And I'm seventeen for another six months." She grinned. "You checked?"

He blushed. "What about in Vijnul?"

"Eighteen. I checked, too."

When Sig.ra Bassano returned, she found the two still seated on the bench, Pietro with his arm around Elena. "Oh, my children!" she cried, wounded by their obvious distress, "cheer up! The chicken's not lost its head yet!"

Pietro said, very seriously, "We've decided to get married."

Sig.ra Bassano sat down beside them. "You're quite sure?"

"Yes," Elena said.

"It's a serious business, getting married. You need to really think about it. More than you thought about ..." She pointed at Elena's belly.

Elena said, "We've thought it through and we agree. We want to."

"Well, if you're sure."

Pietro threw his hands up. "But it's impossible! Elena's not yet of age to get married without her parents' consent. And you know her father's not about to consent."

Sig.ra Bassano mused. "That is a problem, no doubt, though not insuperable. But children, you can't get married against your parents' wishes. You'd regret it ever after."

"But what else can we do?" Elena said hopelessly. "Papa will never allow it. Only this morning he said he wished he could see Pietro hanging from the Vijnul city gates, like they used to do in the Middle Ages."

Pietro gulped. "He really said that?"

"I'm sorry."

"Your father ..." Pietro began, but those eyes looked up at him, and he went on weakly, "... he's pretty stubborn."

Sig.ra Bassano said, "Your fathers are both proud men. It's that kind of pride that leads to so much of the trouble in the world. But that they should keep you apart, just to satisfy a grudge! It would serve them right if you did get ... Oh."

The two lovers waited.

"Maybe ... yes, maybe that would work."

"What?" Elena asked.

"Ssh," Sig.ra Bassano said. "Let me telephone my sister. She lives in Gračnul, she's lived there for years. If she'll help ..."

When everything was arranged, Pietro and Elena said goodbye to Sig.ra Bassano and tried to thank her. "Time enough for that if it all works out," she said. "Now it's past time you should both be home. Be careful, children," she warned. "Not everybody will be friendly if they recognize you. You know that your private lives have made a national crisis."

Pietro raged. "It's the damned papers! They blow everything out of proportion. It doesn't make any sense! Why should anyone even notice us? It's crazy!"

"Crazy or not, it's how things are and how they'll stay, for a while anyway. It would only take one person to recognize you and whisper in the wrong ear. So be careful."

"Thank you." Elena kissed Sig.ra Bassano on the cheek. "My new godmother. Until next time."

"Take care of yourself, my dear."

Pietro accompanied Elena to the South Bridge. There, in the shadow of a stubby tower where crows nested and rubbish was never swept away, they

kissed, murmured a few tender words, and finally parted. “Just two more weeks, sweetheart,” they said. “Two more weeks.”

Pietro watched Elena hurry across the bridge, her brown hair always distinguishable to the eyes of her lover, even far away in the crowd. Then, in the red light of the setting sun, Pietro turned and went slowly homeward. As he came down the via Calvino, cold dread seized him. He wanted to walk away in the opposite direction, or pass by his door and keep going all the way to Venice; but love could not trump hunger and he unwillingly entered, said hello to Sig.ra Bertucci, petted one of the cats, and climbed the stairs to his door.

He had scarcely turned the knob when the door swung open and Vito caught his arm. “Ssh!” he whispered, “don’t go in the parlor. Come into the kitchen.”

Pietro heard an unfamiliar voice resonating from down the hall. “What’s up?” “Pa’s got a visitor,” Vito snickered.

Pietro followed him into the kitchen. He saw on the table a notepad, pen, a stack of books, and a bottle of mineral water — the usual props for Vito’s afternoons these days. “What’s going on?”

Vito pressed his ear to the door. “Ssh. Listen.”

Pietro tried to hear, but the unfamiliar voice was so deep he could only make out a rumbling hum of indistinguishable verbiage.

“Vit’, tell me what’s happening.”

Vito, who also could not make out the monologue, sighed and sat down. “I don’t know. This guy showed up at the door, asked to see Pa, and Pa let him in. After a minute he sent Mama and Grandmama away. And me. But I sneaked back in.”

Pietro sniffed. “Why are you eavesdropping? What’s the big deal? Don’t you have anything better to do?” He sat down. The title of one of Vito’s books caught his eye: *Political Corruption and National Collapse*. “What the hell are you reading?”

“The big deal, brother,” Vito replied, “is that the guy who’s in there lecturing Pa is Alberto Galli.”

“Who?”

“Galli. Don’t you pay attention to anything but your Roijnan girl?”

Pietro started to get mad, but tears sprang to his eyes instead.

“Oh, crap. Can’t even mention her without your sniffing.” Vito went back to the door. “Galli, you boob, Galli! He’s the head of the Green Party.” He pressed his ear tight against the door and screwed his face up into a mask of concentration.

Pietro pressed back the tears. “So?”

Vito grunted with irritation, a teacher faced with a singularly dim pupil.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of weird that a politician would visit us? And not just a politician, but the leader of the Greens?”

Pietro frowned. “Papa’s a Conservative.”

“Exactly.”

Pietro joined Vito at the door.

“Sig. Galli, it’s ridiculous!” Ugo Onesti paced about the living room.

Galli sat on the sofa. “It’s not at all ridiculous, Sig. Onesti,” Galli said in his most solemn voice. “Perfectly reasonable.”

“But I’m a Conservative!”

“Whatever you think of the Green Party, you must admit we always act reasonably.”

“But I’m a Conservative!”

“Politics is the balance between reason and emotion.”

“But I’m a Conservative!”

“As am I.”

Onesti stopped. “You, a Conservative? Ho ho!”

Galli nodded. “Certainly. A loyal Party member from the age of fifteen. But ten years ago I realized that the Conservatives are no longer conservative — they have become radicals. That’s when I joined the true conservatives and left those who have destroyed the word’s meaning. That’s when I became a Green.”

“Ho!” Onesti said again, less forcefully. He sat down across from Galli.

“It’s quite true. You can see it for yourself, if you simply think for a moment and move beyond the rhetoric they use. The Conservative Party is now, and has been for years, utterly radical. Look at how they conduct our nation’s business. Should one manage one’s personal finances in such a way that one’s budget never balances? Of course not. That would be irresponsible. Yet our national budget has not been balanced since they took office. Is this conservative?

“Should one consistently spend more than one earns and accrue debt? Of course not. That is shameful, and in some cases criminal. But our national debt now stands at more than seven billion, an increase of over 300 per cent since they took office. Worse, our debt is increasing by 15% each and every day. That’s almost double the rate of debt growth in the United States, and we don’t have their military. Is this conservative?

“Should one lie to one’s friends in order to make a profit, or attack one’s neighbors with rumors and vile insinuations, just to keep one’s job? Of course not. That is a sin, and a man who does so is ostracized and hated by all decent people. Yet the Conservative Party has done exactly that, undermining political opponents with innuendo and baselessly accusing our neighbor Roijna of

criminal behavior. Is this conservative?

“Should a man destroy his own home, the house he was born in, and leave himself and his family without shelter, just to make a few dollars? Of course not, that would be grotesque. Yet the Conservative Party has sold our national forests to the lumber industry for clear-cutting, our farmlands to the mining industry to be dug up, and leased our rivers and aquifers to manufacturers to poison. Is this conservative?

“You yourself have been a victim of their radical behavior. Your personal tragedy, which should have been kept private, they have trumpeted in the press solely as a distraction, a distraction meant to draw the people’s attention away from the Stanco scandal. That’s how they profit from your dismissal, from your son’s shame. Yes, for a few days they treat you like a hero, but now, when it’s clear that their trumped-up charges won’t fly, they forget about you, toss you aside. Isn’t that true?”

Onesti nodded slowly.

“Now,” Galli continued, “look at the Green Party. We love our home: the fields, the forests, the air and waters of our beautiful country. Because of this love, we want to conserve these rich resources so that our country will remain beautiful, not just for ourselves, but for our children to enjoy and live well from them. No company or corporation should be allowed to destroy the very things that give us life merely for personal profit. And so we battle those short-sighted people who would poison the air we breathe and the water we drink, who would pave over the farmlands where our food grows, who would recklessly and thoughtlessly cut down the trees that furnish us with air, shade, and lumber, who would in fact murder us and our children for their own profit. Is this not truly conservative?

“Because we love our country, we want it to conduct its business responsibly, wisely. Therefore we demand a balanced budget, with all necessary expenses funded equitably, and yet providing for those of our people, the elderly, the infirm, the man who has had a bout of bad luck, the child who has lost her parents, the woman whose husband has died and left her with debt, those who are not capable of supporting themselves in a manner that befits a citizen of our great land, where the shame of any one of us reflects on us all. With a balanced budget, we can all take pride in our nation, our standard of living, and bear the cost of our responsibilities without their becoming a burden to any one of us. Is this not truly conservative?

“We wish to protect our ancient liberties so that every person may enjoy the freedom to succeed or fail according to his or her own capabilities, with the assurance that no company or corporation, no rich man or politician, no police

officer or soldier, by their wealth, lack of scruples, greed, or might of arms, can take away our freedom, health, and capabilities for mere profit. Is this not truly conservative?”

Onesti’s head was spinning. He had never pondered his conservatism. It had always been a part of him, as natural and unexamined as a toenail or, more precisely, as his fat belly, which, like his conservatism, had unconsciously swelled over the years. In fact, he had never examined his opinions and prejudices at all. The possibility that he might be wrong in his assumptions had never occurred to him.

Sig. Galli went on, imperturbable. “Who is the true conservative, Sig. Onesti? The one who undermines our country’s constitution, or the one who protects and defends it? The one who considers himself above the law, or the one who obeys the law and demands that everyone do so? The one who uses our nation’s wealth as his personal bank account, or the one who honors and respects the wealth of our land, the one who knows that it is held in trust for the benefit of all our people, the one who defends our laws, our history, our future? Who is the true conservative? Tell me, Sig. Onesti, are you truly conservative, or are you merely ... a Conservative?”

Onesti sat silent for a very long while. Galli waited patiently.

At last Onesti said, “But ... why me?”

Galli took a deep breath of triumph. “Why? Why not, Sig. Onesti? You are an ordinary man, an ordinary, intelligent, honorable man, and rightly proud of it. Why shouldn’t we seek out an ordinary man? Isn’t it just such an ordinary man that our country needs now, in these troubled times? You, Sig. Onesti, can make a contribution. Honor. Common sense. Moral balance. Practicality.”

Onesti exploded. “But it’s ridiculous! Me, Onesti, run for office? And as a Green? Everyone would laugh! Yes, I confess, it’s very flattering, Sig. Galli, very flattering that you’d think of me for this. But really ... no, really, it’s ridiculous. Really outrageous! Out of the question. No.”

Galli nodded. “Of course you know yourself best. If you think you wouldn’t be up to the task—”

Onesti blinked. “Oh, I don’t say I couldn’t manage it, if I ... but I certainly never thought...”

“Yes, you’re right,” Galli interrupted, “public life is a terrible burden. It demands everything of you, everything you can give, and when you’ve given all you can, it demands even more. It is the ultimate sacrifice a man can make for his country.”

“Sacrifice,” Onesti said. “Yes, and I ...”

“I understand, Sig. Onesti. You’re a man with his own life to live. Business to

attend to. A family to support. A position to fulfill.”

“Yes, I ... yes, the chief has given me my old job back...”

“Ah, your old job. The old, comfortable, well-known post. A job you understand so well that it’s almost automatic, a job you can perform in your sleep. A job that won’t demand of you a moment’s thought. A comfortable, effortless job that you’ll be easy in until the day you are old enough to retire with honors, and be comfortably forgotten.”

Onesti regarded him with despair.

Galli stood. “Sig. Onesti, if you decide not to pursue this, I will respect your decision. No one knows better than I just how much we’re asking of you. But I hope that you will at least consider it. The land needs men like you, Sig. Onesti. I won’t try to deceive you. When I came here I thought I’d find a simple man, a man I could make use of to embarrass the Conservatives. But instead I found a simple and honorable man. That’s a most unusual combination in the political line. And when I saw this, I thought to myself, Maybe, just maybe, Galli, just maybe we Greens have finally found the man who can make a real change in our national politics. If we had men like you working with us ... but I won’t press. I simply ask that you think it over. Consider the possibilities. Sig. Onesti, may I have your word that you will honestly consider this?”

Onesti’s mouth hung open.

Galli smiled almost invisibly. “I see that you will. Thank you, Sig. Onesti. Thank you.”

Galli moved to the door. Onesti followed him. Galli stopped before the door and waited. Onesti waited too, then jumped to open the door.

Galli turned on the landing. “You have my number.”

“Yes,” Onesti said.

“I know you will make the right decision. Sig. Onesti, thank you for allowing me to take up so much of your valuable time. Good day.”

He went down the stairs slowly, back ramrod straight, head held high.

Onesti watched him go, and when he was out of sight, kept staring at the steps.

A hand smacked his shoulder. He gasped.

“Relax, Pa,” Vito said. “What did the old guy want?”

Onesti looked at him with such a look of incomprehension that Vito regretted his little joke.

Pietro stepped up. “Papa, what’s going on?”

A noise came from the stairs — the women had returned. Onesti didn’t move. Giuliana and Sig.ra Sette came up, chatting, but one look at him and they fell silent.

Giuliana came near. “Ugo?”

Onesti closed his mouth, looked at his family, one after the other, then turned back into the apartment. “Giuliana,” he said, “where’s the brandy?”

Giuliana glanced at her mother, at her sons, and went to the kitchen. She returned with a glass of brandy, which she handed to Onesti. He shook his head. “The bottle.”

“Ugo!” Giuliana cried. “Who was that man? What did he do to you?”

Onesti swallowed the brandy and held the empty glass out to her. “I am going to get drunk.”

“Ugo! We haven’t even had our dinner. Why?”

He wagged the glass at her. “Because obviously the world is coming to an end.”

AFTER ZANNI'S BRIEF DECLARATION, the Roijnan government had gone pale and trembled and chirped and peeped among themselves. How to treat this confusing yet obviously threatening oration? The Premier, Lord Rudolf Kecal, called together his cabinet to decide how to respond. Minister of State Rodet demanded that the army immediately invade Serenno, capture Zanni, and annex the eastern provinces. General Zaglič advised discretion, because the army didn't have sufficient funding to succeed. "If this Mitek had been able to get hold of that munitions factory, and we had a year or two to prepare, maybe," the General said. "But we have a freeze on spending."

"What?" cried Rodet. "Incredible! Why?"

"We haven't been able to pay the troops in two years."

"Incredible!" Rodet said again.

"You yourself voted for the freeze."

"So," Rodet went on quickly, "what you're saying is that Roijna sits unprotected from foreign attack?"

"We could defend ourselves, for a short while anyway. But to attack — no, no, completely impractical."

"Incredible!"

Sandor Garnik, Minister of Security, said, "Let's face facts, this Zanni has ignored every rule of international protocol. Very impolite. I think he's been watching too much American television."

Kecal turned to Jak Vlaamstad, ambassador to Serenno. "Vlumstid," he said (although the Vlaamstads had lived in Roijna for three generations, the Premier's Roijnan tongue was incapable of correctly pronouncing a name of Dutch origin), "you're familiar with these crazy Serennians. What do you think? Should we invade? Or just reproach them through the usual channels?"

Vlaamstad sat back in his chair. "Gentlemen," he said, "the only proper course of action is to do nothing."

This raised the others' eyebrows.

"Nothing!" Rodet shouted.

Garnik puffed out his cheeks. "Nothing! He tells us to do nothing!"

Vlaamstad folded his arms across his chest. "Nothing."

General Zaglič raised his hands to quiet the others. "Gentlemen, allow him to explain, please." As a military man, he understood the importance of doing nothing.

Vlaamstad waited patiently while the others grumbled. When it was quiet, he said, "There are three reasons for doing nothing: First, President Zanni was showing off for his own people, to placate them, show them he's a tough guy and keep them busy. He doesn't care a fig about this Mitek fellow and what he did or didn't do. Why do you think there were no international press representatives there? He's only concerned with the trial of Stanco and this by-election that could blow the Conservatives' majority in Parliament. He doesn't intend to do anything to Roijna."

"Ho!" Rodet exclaimed.

"Second," Vlaamstad continued, "the Serennian army also lacks arms and funding. The munitions factory Mitek tried to grab hasn't filled an order in over a year. There aren't any other munitions factories in Serenno, and they stopped buying foreign-made weapons seven years ago because the World Bank denied them a loan and the Americans haven't come through with anything either, due to their own economic problems."

"Are you certain of that?" Zaglič asked.

"Absolutely. Even the United States hasn't sold them any arms."

Zaglič gaped. "Not even the United States?"

Vlaamstad proceeded. "And third, this Mitek is certainly, undoubtedly, undeniably guilty of everything they've charged."

The ministers looked at one another.

"Guilty, I say, and guilty I repeat. Inquiries have found so many inconsistencies in the stories this rascal tells that there's no question he really was manipulating the factory's clients, bribing officials, and of course we already know he attacked this tax commissioner, whatever his name is. If we protest this speech Zanni tossed off yesterday, they'll demand an open investigation. We'd have to comply, and then it will all come out. We would not look good, especially after you, Premier Kecal, announced that Mitek is innocent. It had to be done, of course, we can't have foreigners telling us to keep our noses clean. But a show of righteous indignation now is inadvisable."

The others nodded.

"And so I say we do nothing."

A vote was taken, the decision was made to do nothing. The General sighed with relief. Rodet ranted, Garnik and the others immediately forgot what they'd been talking about, Vlaamstad returned to the embassy in Fricchi.

But.

The famous Roijnan author Sholz, two-time loser of the Nobel prize for literature, had seen the televised broadcast of President Zanni's press conference repeated on the Roijnan network, and his stunted national pride was piqued. He

put his vodka aside with an oath. “The arrogant bastard, how dare he threaten us?” He sat fuming for a few minutes while the announcer spoke about criminals in the Crimea and a new epidemic in Madagascar. He tossed witty, cutting rejoinders around in his mind, tested their balance, changed a word here and there. Then he laughed, “Ha ha,” and went to his typewriter.

He still used a typewriter for his work. He did not trust computers because he’d once read of an author who had lost an entire manuscript through a hard-drive failure. Also, using a typewriter set him apart from the younger generation of writers, whom he called lazy hacks, shallow dilettantes, unworthy fungi on the great tree of literature that had brought forth the masterworks of Tolstoi, Dostoevski, Potocki, Mann, and himself, Sholz. The typewriter was an old Olympia, manufactured in Germany, and somehow over the years had lost the letter “c.” A lesser author would have bought a new typewriter or a computer, but not the great Sholz. His books now did without any word that contained the letter c. No character in his novels ever paced or coughed, wore a cravat or drank cognac, was confused or died of cancer or collected china or had any peace at all. Very modern. Oulipian. ’Pataphysical.

He rolled a fresh white page into the carriage, poked a finger in one ear and wiggled it, wiped it under the seat of his chair, and began to type.

Tonight there premiered on television a new burlesque, but a bitter, dark burlesque, a sort of humorless buffoonery, a type of drama unfathomably popular in these times of lowered standards that rate humanity as no better than amoebas in a drop of dirty water. In the first part, Bobo Zanni, the fearful leader of our old neighbor to the west, Serenno, told a supposedly funny joke about one of our people, a story with not one word of truth in it, nor even a passing likeness to reality, and one that is already too-often repeated and reprinted in that land. Evidently, if one tells the most outrageous lie over there and repeats it but two or three times, those simple, mild-hearted, soft-headed people take it as gospel truth. End of part one.

In part two, Sig. Zanni stated quite plainly, with the solemn aplomb of the bad performer, that his nation would not bow down before the “insult” we had delivered — that’s what he terms the finding of our nation’s judges in this matter, who released a man guilty of no wrongdoing. There is no hint of any illegality, no sign of wrongful intent, nothing but the false imputation of our dear neighbors to the west, who seem to believe that speaking a word makes it so. End of part two.

In the third part, Sig. Zanni — yes, this drama is a monologue — released a grand hortatory flourish of trite mottoes with the general import that Serenno will bravely refuse the findings of our legal system, admit no error on its part, and nobly ignore reality. The visuals move to a fluttering green-and-gold flag, the national anthem swells. Fin.

Now, every viewer must admit that this sort of humor tends to pall. A fool may be amusing for a few minutes, but eventually his pratfalls grow embarrassing. Theatre should engage the mind, but Zanni’s *drame pathétique* goes beyond the limits of taste and repulses thought. Truly, if this is what we have to look forward to at the International Festival of the Arts due to open soon in Serenno — that nation’s first international festival of any kind — then this author despairs of its triumph.

Before he composed the final paragraph, Sholz carefully considered the stipend he would lose by not attending the International Festival of the Arts to be held in Fricchi. But it was a nominal stipend, and he accepted its loss with a daring toss of his gray mane.

This author has been invited to Serenno's International Festival of the Arts (he enjoys some esteem in the international arena for his work) but now, after their example of misguided nationalism, he regrets that he will not be able to fulfill his obligation. Better that he should stay home, where at least he may turn off those programs that offend his tender sensibilities. He hopes that other Roijnans invited to Serenno — famous artists like the painter Sendik Bikmon, the players Vind Kirill and Bonham Panik, and the singer Ma Bang — will think again about attending, will remain in their homeland, and will not waste their talents on those who, although they urgently require exposure to real Art to take away the bitter taste of the poor stuff they are usually impelled to suffer, are as yet unable to value or even understand it when it hits them in the head.

When the editorial appeared in the *Roijna Review*, the reaction was slow but implacable. Sholz, who had been rather forgotten since his last novel had appeared thirteen years earlier, was talked about everywhere. First Vind Kirill, the famous actor, bravely canceled his appearance at the arts festival, although this meant the loss of free transportation and lodgings and five nights in the four-star Hotel Giorgio. Because Kirill would not be going, Panik was forced to cancel his appearance, since they were scheduled to perform together in the renowned Roijnan avant-garde play *The Blind Antichrist*, a four-hour duologue performed without intermission. People sighed with relief at the announcement. Dred Vargl, a sculptor, also canceled his exhibit at the festival. Then the dancer Marija Zalewska and her troupe Prometheus Enchained canceled.

Artists in other lands began to make public protests. The Swedish author Johana Karlensdattir published a statement that, until Serenno issued a formal apology, she would not cross its borders. She had never visited Serenno before and had no plans to do so in future, but her statement sounded as a clarion call to others, and the general population finally noticed what was going on.

Only the popular singer Ma Bang refused to join the boycott. At every interview she rasped, in between puffs at her cigarette, "No, sure I'm going to Fricchi, why the hell not? I got lots o' fans there, you know? They're not all dumb shits like that Zanni asshole."

Every day the papers printed news about the artistic boycott. Every day interviews, stories, commentary were televised about the cultural fiasco.

"Fiasco!" Zanni yelled at Pucci over his cellphone. "They actually use that word, right here on page one. And it's all your fault, Pucci, you idiot! That damned speech of yours has screwed everything up. I thought it was threatening, didn't I say it was threatening? That's exactly what I said! But no, no, you know

better than me, poor little me with my empty head, oh, yes! Even my wife is mad at me.”

Pucci’s voice said, “How is Sig.ra Zanni?”

“How is she? How do you think! She’s mad as hell, that’s how she is!”

“I am not mad,” Sig.ra Zanni snapped.

“This festival is her pet project, you know that, the first international festival Serenno’s ever hosted. She wanted to put us on the cultural map. But now half the artists have pulled out—”

“More than half,” Sig.ra Zanni interjected.

“More than half. You understand, Pucci? She’s trying to find replacements.”

“A Canadian tenor,” Sig.ra Zanni prompted.

“She’s had to accept a Canadian tenor.”

“A Bulgarian chorus.”

“And a Bulgarian chorus!”

Sig.ra Zanni shuddered. “An American puppeteer.”

“Really,” Zanni bleated, “it doesn’t bear thinking of. And it’s all your fault, Pucci, not mine, oh no, I’m not taking the blame for this one. We’ve got to do something!”

“We can’t apologize,” Pucci’s voice said. “They’d see us as weak.”

“No, of course not, we can’t apologize.”

The President and his wife were in the limousine on their way to a performance at the Opera. In the front seat, next to the chauffeur, sat the President’s new bodyguard, a huge man with great, hairy hands, a neck wider than his forehead, and a comforting bulge in his breast pocket. His name was Italo Grop, but the President could never remember that. He called him “you,” as in “You, sit over there,” or “Don’t walk so close behind me, you.” The President enjoyed having such a big fellow behind or beside him at a press conference, at a political meeting, or best of all, the few times he happened to walk on the street. It made a great impression on people, it shut them up, and it made him look like he really was president of a nation.

Zanni looked down at the *Post* in his hand. On page one, besides the article that had prompted his call to Pucci, there was a more pleasing article about the festival under the byline Davide Delsano, an article his wife’s press agent had written. On page four were two letters to the editor: the first demanded that Roijna launch a new investigation of the Mitek affair; the second demanded that Zanni apologize to Mitek and all Roijna, end this stupid standoff, and get back to the business of running the country. “Pucci, have you read these letters in the *Post*? And they call this ‘fair and balanced’!” While Pucci responded vacuously, he flipped to page five, page six. Then a headline grabbed his eye. “Onesti Runs

Under Green Flag,” he read. “What the hell?”

Sig.ra Zanni gently hissed. She had already seen page six.

“Pucci!” Zanni screamed.

In the front seat, Grop turned incuriously to see if the President was being murdered.

“Pucci, you idiot! Did you see this? That son of a bitch in Borgo, what’s his name, Onesti — he’s running for Stanco’s seat!”

“Oh?” Pucci said. He, too, had already seen the *Post*.

“Against Canale! And as a damned *Green*! You told me at the beginning, Pucci, that bastard was a good Conservative, the perfect ass to make a hero out of. That he’d do what we wanted.”

“Bobo, calm down,” Sig.ra Zanni said.

“This is awful. He has a name now, a reputation, and *we* gave it to him! Listen to what he says. ‘The corruption of the Conservative Party must be dragged out into the light of day and thrown onto the compost heap to fertilize a new world order’!”

“Not bad,” Pucci muttered.

“What? What did you say?”

“Sounds like one of Galli’s broadsides.”

“Damn! God damn it! Pucci, it doesn’t sound ‘not bad’ to me. It sounds dangerous, very dangerous. If that shit-stained—”

“Don’t worry,” Pucci said, “he’s running as a Green, there’s no possibility he’ll get more than ten votes in the province.”

“Do you hear what he says?” Zanni asked his wife. To Pucci: “And what if he does? What if he wins the seat? You haven’t been right yet, why should you be right about this? If he wins, our majority is gone. And if the Greens should ally themselves with the Progressives ...”

Pucci’s voice said, “Don’t worry.”

“It says here he’s already got popular support. Says so right here. ‘A public disgusted with political scandal is drawn to a political outsider with an unblemished reputation.’ That’s what it says.”

“It’s just the *Post*.”

“They’re not supposed to print this sort of thing! If you’re wrong about this, Pucci ...”

“I’m not wrong. He’s a Green now. Nothing to worry about.”

Zanni stared at the offending article and said faintly, “Everything we touch turns to mud.”

“It’s one of Galli’s plots,” Pucci said. “But why? What’s he after? He has to know he can’t win. The province will never elect a Green. So why is he doing it?”

If I were an enemy of the Conservatives, what would I want out of this by-election?" Silence. Then, "Ah."

"Ah?" Zanni honked. "Ah what?"

"I understand. To embarrass us, he hopes to nullify the election results. If a percentage of those who usually vote Conservative or Progressive instead go over to the Greens . . ."

"Oh God," Zanni said. "No one gets a clear majority, the seat could remain vacant, they might decide to appoint, and with popular opinion shifting ..."

"Exactly. So even if they lose, they win. Little by little he can erode our base. Very funny."

Zanni erupted. "Did you hear that, Lauretta? He thinks it's funny!"

Sig.ra Zanni turned to the window and looked out at all the sane people walking along the street.

"Pucci, I don't understand you. The Party is attacked on every side, we're facing an historic crisis, and you think it's funny? Really, Pucci, I'm beginning to worry about you."

Just then the limousine pulled up before the Fricchi State Opera, an imposing building of three floors, granite, decorated with statues of Gounod, Massenet, Meyerbeer, and the native Serennian composer Lodovico Baldini (1843 — 1908). The sight of that grim stone façade always sent a tremor through the President. He hated opera.

"We're here," Zanni said, and flipped the telephone shut. The chauffeur opened the door and Sig.ra Zanni stepped out. On the balcony that jutted over the Opera steps, three trumpeters blew a fanfare, a bit out of tune, but Zanni did not know that. He stepped out, hands raised. The ten or twelve people who stood on the steps applauded politely. Grop, the bodyguard, extruded himself from the limousine. "You, come," Zanni growled.

Grop's doughy face expressed no emotion. He fell into step behind the President and his wife, and the little parade marched to the Opera steps.

Zanni smiled broadly at the small crowd, shook a hand here and there, whispered to Lauretta, "What are we hearing tonight?"

Lauretta replied in a whisper through her own strained smile, "*The Mason of Persia*," the only one of Baldini's operas still performed regularly, at least in Serenno.

Zanni managed to keep his smile. "Good. Not too loud, I can get a little nap."

Lauretta had taken a nap that afternoon in order to remain awake this evening. She liked opera no better than her husband did, but she was the arbiter of culture in this corner of Europe. Furthermore, she was a real admirer of the evening's soprano, Lucinda Pacetti, whom she often drafted for benefit performances; a

wonderful woman with the voice of an angel and the figure of a bull.

Inside, they climbed the great staircase to the parterre and entered the royal box. Grop remained in the corridor to guard the door. The lights dimmed as the President and his wife took their seats. The conductor appeared in the orchestra and climbed to the podium while the audience applauded. On the stage, Sig.ina Pacetti entered through the curtain in the costume of a Persian odalisque, a vision frightful to any normal libido. She waddled center stage and posed. The audience muttered amongst themselves, wondering what this might mean. Sig.ina Pacetti gestured for silence. The conductor raised his baton, and the orchestra struck up the national anthem. The audience members reluctantly clambered to their feet as Sig.ina Pacetti curtsied and began to sing.

*We salute thee, fair Serenno!
Proudly we raise our song!
To thy beauty and thy glory,
And your history so gory,
Joyfully we sing in throng!*

A spotlight flicked on, swung round, and lit up the royal box. The President blinked and looked to his wife, confused. She pushed him to the front of the box. The audience glanced around. A woman in the stalls, covered in jewels, began to applaud; another joined in, then another, another. Zanni tried to look presidential as the sparkles caused by the spotlight twirled before his eyes. Lauretta moved up beside him and took his arm.

*All the virtues bestowed, Serenno,
On thy sons and daughters free;
Ever striving, ever seeking,
On the battlefields still reeking
We adore thee on bended knee!*

The applause grew and grew, until one could scarcely hear the singer's bray. Zanni whispered to Lauretta, "What the hell's going on?"

*Raise the standard! Raise it boldly!
Answer now to duty's call
To the service of thy country,
Sparing nothing, giving all;
Gird your loins and join the battle*

*'Gainst fear, hate and enmity,
Each in full faith all achieving,
Live in peace where man is free!*

Cries erupted from the audience, “Viva Zanni! Viva!” Everyone was stamping, shouting, “Hurrah!”

Lauretta said to Zanni, as loudly as possible to be heard over the uproar, “They’re cheering for you.”

“What? Why?”

“Oh, Bobo,” she sighed.

He shook with the roar of sound. They had begun to clap rhythmically, and the cry rose up, “Zan-ni! Zan-ni! Zan-ni!” Heavens! thought the President. A spontaneous demonstration!

Sig.ina Pacetti sang fervently, militantly, pounding out the rhythm with her large foot.

*God of nations, bless Serenno!
We her children do demand,
Give us strength and loyalty
To defend the liberty
Of Serenno, dear motherland!*

The audience exploded in wild shouts at the end of the anthem. Zanni bowed. They love me, he thought with wonder and satisfaction. Look at this, Greens! You’ll never get such an ovation!

Sig.ra Zanni smiled at the crowd, and most especially at Sig.ina Pacetti, who had instructed her on the use of clagues. The singer curtseyed demurely, then raised her beefy arms to receive a small portion of the cheers she had instigated.

Grop stood in the empty corridor, legs spread wide, hands folded quietly together at his waist. He heard the national anthem and the growing cheers, the wild applause at the end. He heard the ovation subside, the audience fall quiet again. Then the orchestra began the overture to *The Mason of Persia*. He sighed, closed his eyes, and an expression of simple bliss played over his tuberous face: he loved music, he loved opera, and he especially loved Baldini. Ah, now the famous polonaise ...

VITO RAN THROUGH the auditorium with a stack of fliers in his hands. As he reached the door, someone called out, “Vit’! Try the library, there are always liberals there.”

“Okay!” he hollered, and ran out into the street.

Since his father had been fired, Vito had become more and more political. He first watched the television news, then, unimpressed, gave up on television and listened only to the radio. He read book after book, pamphlets, tracts, and newspapers. He did not much like the *Post* or the *Globe*; he preferred the *Serenno Observer* and *The People’s Voice*. And since the announcement of Onesti’s candidacy, Vito had avidly labored for the Green Party. Now he was distributing fliers to advertise the debate that night between Dario Canale, the Conservative candidate, Yolanda Nova, Progressive, and the Green candidate, his own father, Ugo Onesti.

Vito left twenty fliers at the Café Madrid, another twenty at a kiosk, then ran to the library. He ran with purpose and great joy, a joy such as he had never known before. Maybe it was because of the excitement of finally having a purpose, something real to do; maybe because it was the first time in his young life that anything important had been entrusted to him. His father was battling corruption and he could help, in his own small way.

In the library, Vito approached the main desk and said breathlessly, “Excuse me! I have fliers. Where can I put them out for people to take?”

The librarian looked at Vito over her glasses. “What kind of fliers?”

“About the big debate tonight.”

The librarian sighed. “Politics. Put them over there, in the window. That’s where we put such stuff.” She turned back to her work.

Vito went to the window. There on the broad sill sat piles of fliers, pamphlets, and leaflets covered in dust and knitted together with cobwebs. One announced a poetry reading that had happened six months earlier. Another urged everyone to write letters to Parliament demanding the library’s budget not be cut. Another was titled, “The Sole Principle is the Life Force.” Vito read the first few typewritten lines: “HistoricISM, AnarchISM, MaterialISM, NegativISM, PositivISM, CommunISM, RepublicanISM, StoicISM, and every other ISM in the World: mere rusty Toys, Trash not worth Our Attention. The Sole True Guideing Principle is the Life Force, All Esle is Death. Let us Live our Lives Intensely and embrace our Deths tragically. Let us demand All ...” The paper

was yellowed and curled and covered in fly specks.

Vito snorted. This was obviously no place to leave his precious fliers, they would never be found here.

He looked around, grinned, and went in among the bookshelves. On every shelf he placed a flier where it would be unavoidable. He had set out almost the entire stack and was feeling quite pleased with his cleverness when a voice interrupted. "Hey, you, kid. What crap is this?"

Vito spun about, self-satisfaction vanishing instantly. He was, after all, a kid.

A young man sat at the end of the aisle, a young man with long hair, a three-day growth of beard, and the biggest hands Vito had ever seen. Good looking, handsome even, but filthy. Purposely filthy. Resolutely filthy. He wore combat pants that hung low on his hips, a ripped black sweater covered in lint, a camouflage vest, and he smelled rank. He struck Vito as someone striving to appear dangerous.

He held one of Vito's leaflets. "Debate, huh? What party you working for? You a good little Conservative?"

Vito swallowed and said angrily, "I am not! I'm a Green."

The young man smirked. "Oo, a Green. Aren't we righteous. Well, at least you've got some kind of political commitment. Pointless commitment, but better than nothing."

"What's wrong with the Greens?" Vito demanded.

"What's right with them? That's the real question." The young man stretched and yawned. "Every political party is a seed of injustice watered by the blood of true believers."

Vito scowled. "Oh yeah? What's that supposed to mean? Sounds like something you copied out of a book."

The young man raised an eyebrow. "You're right, it's out of a book. Okay, I'll put it in my own words, but don't expect poetry. Political parties are organized only to maximize the power of the individuals at the top of the party hierarchy, to fool the underlings in the party that they have some power, all at the expense of those outside the party and the public at large. They're nothing but the logical excrescence of a failed patriarchal materialist system, and as such should be destroyed like the trash they are. Get it? If a tree is rotten, its fruit'll be rotten too. That's logic."

Vito made a rude noise. "That's not logic, that's metaphor. A metaphor's not a logical argument. And your analogy is false anyway because fruit by definition can't be rotten till after it's been produced, so a tree can't bear rotten fruit."

The young man raised both eyebrows.

"So, what party do *you* belong to?" Vito asked.

The young man snorted. “Didn’t I just say every party is rotten? I don’t belong to any damn party. I’m an individual. I’m my own party. The human party, that’s me.” He tossed the flier at Vito. It floated to the floor between them, a defunct butterfly. “When you get around to growing up, we’ll talk again.”

Vito blushed. “If you can’t stand having your arguments refuted, then no, we won’t talk again. And if you’re a shining example of being grown up, then I guess I’m in no rush to join that elite company!”

The young man suddenly laughed. “Okay, okay. I’m being a doctrinaire asshole, and you can quote me. What’s your name, kid?”

“Don’t call me a kid, asshole.”

The young man smiled, dangerously. “You only get to call me that once.”

Vito tried but did not succeed in stifling a grin. “I’m Vito. Vito Onesti.”

“Onesti? That’s the guy running for Stanco’s seat, isn’t it? What’s his name? Bluto? Blago?”

“Ugo! Ugo Onesti. He’s my father,” Vito said with pride.

“Too bad for you. So party affiliation is hereditary after all. That supports my theory that most people simply perpetuate the ideological bias of their progenitors, either from genetic predisposition, indoctrination, or sheer laziness. Or all three. Oh, don’t get all worked up,” he said to mollify Vito’s obvious temper, “I’m not insulting your father. I’ve never even seen him. Don’t need to. There are millions just like him.”

“You don’t know shit!”

“Oh, I definitely know shit. Shit is one of my major areas of expertise. Let’s talk about your particular shit. Let me see ... He’s around fifty years old, with too little hair and too much stomach. Wears a suit, even on his day off. Thinks family is the most important thing there is, but spends most of his free time in the bistros with his buddies drinking and discussing all the important crap he doesn’t understand. Am I right?”

Vito pouted.

“Uh-huh. I’m just surprised he’s a Green. Guys like that are usually Conservatives. Weird.”

“It’s not weird,” Vito said. “He was a Conservative, you’re right, he was always a Conservative, but the Party is corrupt, they’re all thieves and adulterers like that Stanco, so my father’s running as a Green. The leader of the Green Party himself asked him to run.”

“Interesting. What kind of deal did he wangle?”

Vito grimaced. “You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you? Well, who the hell are you?”

“Sergio.”

“Sergio what?”

“Just Sergio. I don’t need a family name. The world’s my family. Anyway, a family name’s too dangerous.”

Vito squinted at him. “What do you mean, dangerous?”

“Makes it too easy for the cops. So I’m just Sergio.”

Vito leaned back against the bookshelves with a display of vast worldliness. “Cops after you, huh?”

“They have been, and they will be again. But today I’m feeling lazy.” He yawned. “If you really want to fight the good fight, don’t waste time with stupid fliers. They don’t accomplish anything. Only actions matter.”

“What kind of actions?”

Sergio laughed. “It’s probably too early to talk to you about that. I don’t know you. You might have a brain behind that cute face, maybe you’ve got what it takes to make a difference. Maybe. But I’m not putting my life in the hands of a kid I don’t know.”

Vito snorted and turned to go.

“If you do have what it takes, you’ll want to learn.”

Vito turned back. “Learn what?”

Sergio shook the hair out of his large, brown eyes. He studied the boy as a lover studies his partner to decide just what to touch first. “You could start with Bakunin. Then Stirner, Kropotkin, and Nieuwenhuis and Debord. No, those are beyond you for now. Start out easy so your head doesn’t explode.” He pulled from his back pocket a crumpled newspaper with torn pages and smeared ink. He pitched it at Vito, who caught it awkwardly. “Try that first.”

Vito read the paper’s name, *Black Flag*.

“Then if you want to find out more,” Sergio said, “come to one of our meetings sometime. At the Green Cockatoo. That’ll open your eyes. Or if that’s too scary for you, come back here. I like hanging out in the library. It’s a good place for a nap.”

Vito spun on his heel and left. What an asshole! he thought. Talk about punks! Long hair, doesn’t shave, that “revolutionary” outfit — like a bad actor on television. And he stinks. Just another romantic poseur, using politics instead of poetry to feel important, praising the masses so he won’t disappear into them.

But Vito did not throw away the *Black Flag*. He put it in his pocket, after folding it so the title wouldn’t show.

He returned to the town hall and the crowd preparing for the night’s debate. Technicians were setting up microphones and running cables, cameras were being placed. They were televising the debate, the first time that had ever been

done in Caprio. His father was going to be on television. There his father was now, on stage, with someone putting makeup on him.

His father, wearing makeup?

"Hi, Vito," someone said.

He turned to find Sig.ra Fadena, the reporter from the *Voice*, coming up the aisle. "Hi, Signora. Are you reporting the debate?"

"You bet," said Anna. "We have to keep the public informed about our new politician, right? If we don't keep his name in front of them, people might forget."

"People aren't as stupid as you think," Vito said. "Pardon me."

Anna smiled. "The proper response of youthful faith. Well, I have faith in the people too, but I've had a little more experience in all this than you have, dear, and believe me, it's better to remind them. Often. What have you been doing?"

"Putting up fliers around town to advertise the debate. I can't believe it'll be on television."

"There are the cameras. Only local stations, but the national network will run clips later. It's pretty big news, a Green having a shot against a Conservative."

"Right!" Vito said. "We have to root out the corruption that—"

Anna stopped him. "You don't have to sell me, I'm already on your side." She set down her bag. "You think getting your papa elected will accomplish that?"

"Sure. Pa's very honest, I never get away with anything around him. He always knows when I've done anything wrong."

"Then we could certainly use him in Fricchi. But there are bigger things at stake."

Vito nodded. "The whole basis of our government, yes. This Stanco trial, all they're talking about is his mistress. Like it's only about sex. They ought to be digging up the truth about where the public funds went. But they don't! If the Conservatives remain uncontested, Zanni can get away with anything. I'm afraid he'll start a war."

Anna cocked her head. "Are you really afraid of that?"

"Aren't you? I don't want to be a soldier."

"Tell me, Vito," Anna asked, "have you ever written anything?"

"Huh?"

"I was just thinking, maybe you'd like to try writing an article on all this."

Vito's face lit up. "Me?"

"Why not? Just a simple piece."

"For the *Voice*?"

"Fazi might like it. Could be effective, a piece that shows what you young people think about this mess, what you're worried about. Show the folks you

aren't all wasting your time on bad music and computer games. I'm not guaranteeing anything."

"That'd be cool!" Vito danced with excitement. "I could get published! But I've never written anything, except reports for school. I don't know where to start."

"That's always the hardest part, dear. Just start the way you were talking, what you're worried about. Zanni starting a war. The corruption in the majority party. When you get something down on paper, let me know and I'll look it over, make some suggestions."

"I'll start right now!" He ran up to the stage.

Anna grinned. It was like seeing herself at that age, full of fervor, eager and ready to make a mark on the world, to sweep everything clean and force it to be better than it is. Well, she was older now, and for all her hard work she couldn't see that the world had been much improved. But while the fire in her had subsided somewhat, she still felt the smoldering embers. She still wanted to shake the world and make it see the truth. It just took so much time, and the world worked so hard to avoid anything like the truth.

She saw Davide Delsano enter the hall. Mildly surprised, she went up to him as he was searching for his seat. "Hello, Davide," she said. "Slumming?"

"Anna! What are you—?" He shook his head. "Stupid question. Of course you'd be here, a Green's running. How are you?"

"Same as always. Don't you look successful! That is some suit. Agreeing with Zanni agrees with you."

He made a face. "I'm too puffed to respond to friendly fire just now, thank you." He dropped his bag and coat.

She perched on the back of a seat. "Sorry about that. I thought old friends like us could move right to the amiable sparring. If we still are old friends."

"Look, I'm sorry about that. But once word gets around I'm fraternizing with the radicals, there goes the old career. However, if we keep it quiet ..."

Anna shook her head. "I hate politics."

"Ha!"

"The personal, career-oriented kind. Now, if you decided to work for the common good instead of yourself ..."

"Here we go again. As you well know, I've never had any interest in the common good. Why's that bother you so much? You're friendly enough with Gallioti and Rubini and the other guys on the paper, and they're all Conservatives."

Her voice rose a bit. "Because you could have been something more, something better—!"

“Sure. And I could have been an astronaut, except I’m afraid of heights. At least the Conservatives don’t care what you believe, as long as you do what they tell you to.”

Anna managed a laugh.

“Anyway, I’m too pooped for polemics.” He stretched and popped his back. “The train here’s kind of rough, isn’t it?”

She forced herself to relax. “You get used to it. But I drove this time.”

“Been coming out here to the sticks a lot?”

“Mm-hmm. Recently.” She patted his arm in a friendly way. “You want some coffee before the show starts? Or are you afraid to be seen with me even out here in the sticks?”

He looked around and smiled. “In Borgo, no. Nobody I know would show their face here. And coffee would be great. Do they have coffee in Borgo?”

“Very good coffee. Direct from Turkey, and so strong you won’t be able to sleep through the debate. Come on.”

He started up the aisle. “When does the circus start?”

“Not for another hour.” She took his arm and drew him to the door. “Keep your head down, I don’t want people to know I fraternize with the enemy.”

Vito went up to his father, who was chatting with Aldo Tretta. Tretta was saying, “But economic development, Ugo! How can that happen under such a system?”

“Well—”

Sig. Galli, sitting nearby, said, “Very simple, Sig. Tretta. The factories must be converted to new industries. For example, the oil companies would move into renewable energy, such as solar, or wind, or geothermal. They’ll make even more from that than from oil. They’ll have to do so eventually anyway, of course, when oil reserves are depleted, so they might as well start now.”

“But the cost!” Tretta protested. “The cost to convert the factories, and cars, our power grid — you’re talking a complete reworking of the whole infrastructure!”

“If they’d started thirty years ago, when we first saw these problems coming ...”

“But they didn’t! The cost—”

“The cost is inevitable, Sig. Tretta, whether they want to face facts or not. They’ll simply have to accept it and move forward.”

“Listen to Sig. Galli, Aldo, he’s very smart,” said Onesti.

“Pa,” Vito said, and then, “Papa.”

“Ah, Vito, there you are!” Onesti winked at him. “So, what do you think? Do

I look like a movie star?"

Vito made a face. "You look weird, Papa."

"Oho!"

The makeup man, who was brushing rouge on Onesti's cheeks, said, "You'll look marvelous on camera. Look up ... good. Now I have to figure out what to do with that nose."

Vito grunted and ran backstage to start on his article.

"Leave my nose alone," Onesti said with some trepidation. "It's always come in handy."

"That potato? No, sir. My reputation won't allow it."

"Potato?" Onesti said. He looked cross-eyed at the referenced protuberance.

"Just look at this," said the makeup man, pointing. "And that. And ... well, the whole thing." He was a bald man with one glass eye that looked to the left, or up, or sometimes backwards into his head. "So, unto the breach!"

Tretta threw up his hands. "Enough! I can't watch any more. Goodbye, Ugo, I'll see you after this is over." He paused. "Ugo."

"Hm?" Onesti said, eying him over the makeup man's scalp in friendly fashion.

"You know that I don't agree with ... with your new way of thinking. But ... good luck."

"Thank you, Aldo." He couldn't smile around the makeup man's brushing. "Enjoy the show."

Tretta left the stage and went to find a seat out front.

Onesti sat quietly while the makeup man made magic. The prospect of appearing on television and debating experienced politicians did not much worry him. Ten days before, however, when he had made his first speech at a rally, he had almost fainted during the introduction. Galli caught him before he collapsed, whispered in his ear, "Remember, sheep are not frightening," and pushed him up to the podium. Onesti had stared at the seventy-two faces in the hall for what seemed years, but was only a few seconds. Then, miraculously, his mouth opened, his tongue moved, and the speech he had practiced over and over almost spoke itself. The faces before him relaxed, and as he spoke a sense of power had gradually filled his soul like warm brandy.

Now he smiled at Galli, who watched the makeup man's progress carefully. "Why does Canale have so many people with him?" He gestured with his chin toward the Conservative candidate, who sat on the other side of the stage with his own makeup team.

"Conservatives need all the help they can get," Galli replied.

Onesti chuckled. "He looks nervous. I wonder why. He has much more

experience at this sort of thing than I do. Look!”

Canale frantically leaped from his chair and ran to the bathroom just offstage.

“His third trip. Poor man.”

Galli studied Onesti with quiet curiosity. This fellow was a good choice, he thought. A natural politician of the public type. Of no use behind the scenes, of course, where the real work is done, but useful out front where a smile means more than a brain and confidence means more than content; out front where the sleepy sheep think they actually matter. And most important, of course, was that he used to be a Conservative who’d changed his mind. That was already making a difference — a number of Conservatives polled said they would consider voting Green this time, now that they had a living example to show them the way.

“Where’s the Progressive?” Onesti asked. “It’s getting late, doesn’t she know what time we start?”

“She’ll be here.”

“My mother-in-law is always talking about her. Nova’s from Princi, isn’t she? I never see anything about her in the papers.”

“The Progressives don’t expect much from this election.”

Onesti nodded. “Yes, we’ve always gone Conservative here.”

“Sig. Onesti,” the makeup man complained, “please stop talking! Do you want your nose to look like it’s sprouting out of your forehead?”

“I’m sorry.” He winked at Galli, but Galli was watching Canale, who had come back from the toilet. He looked pale. Galli wondered why. He also wondered what would happen if the poor fellow had to run off like that in the middle of the debate. Would compassion win him any points?

“You have your notes?” he asked Onesti suddenly.

“In my pocket. But I have them memorized.”

“Sometimes one forgets when the cameras start.”

Onesti wagged a finger. “Maybe, maybe not. I’ve never been on television. Well, once, but only in the audience of a game show. Ah, here’s my brood!”

Entering the hall, Giuliana Onesti and Pietro looked around, immediately saw Onesti, and worked their way through the growing crowd to the stage. Giuliana said, “Ugo, you look beautiful! Just like a movie star.”

The makeup man glowed.

“Interesting, eh?” Onesti said. “Pietro, what do you think?”

Pietro regarded his father with horror.

“But where’s Mother?”

Giuliana brushed away a smudge of powder from his jacket lapel. “Outside talking with some people.”

“Eh?”

“Sig.ra Nova’s out there holding forth on some dreadfully important issue or other and Mama stopped to listen. Ah, here she comes.”

Sig.ra Sette entered, stopping here and there on her way to the stage to chat with friends. When she finally came up to them, she smiled at Ugo and pointedly ignored Sig. Galli. “So,” she said, “all ready for your debut?”

“I think so. I was afraid, Mother, that you were going to miss the show.”

“Never, dear. How could you think that? I’m so thrilled for you.”

Galli said, “I understand you’ve been talking with Sig.ra Nova outside. She should be preparing for the debate. It’s almost time to start.”

Sig.ra Sette sniffed. “Perhaps she’d rather talk with the people she’ll be representing than bother about looking pretty for the cameras.”

“Surely you don’t begrudge our Onesti looking nice?”

“Of course not, Sig. Galli. Ugo is my son-in-law, practically my own boy, and I’m very happy for him.”

“Don’t bother about mother,” Onesti said. “She’s been a loyal supporter of Sig.ra Nova for many years, but she’s put that behind her.”

Sig.ra Sette frowned.

Galli stood. “Well, I should go find my seat.”

Onesti started. “Is it that time already?”

“Don’t be nervous, you’ll do fine. Just look into the camera. That makes you seem sincere.”

“Oh,” Onesti said with sudden uncertainty, “I’m not worried.”

The makeup man surveyed the results of his efforts. “Not bad, not bad.”

“Let me see,” Onesti said, taking the mirror, already forgetting his momentary fear.

Galli smiled and left the stage.

Giuliana squinted into the wings. “Where’s my Vito? I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Here I am,” Vito said, coming out of the shadows. He pointed at a row of seats at the side of the stage. A woman and two men, Canale’s wife and the husband and brother of Sig.ra Nova, were already there. “Let’s sit down.”

“We’re sitting on stage? Oh, I should have worn something nicer.”

“You look good, Mama.”

“Why, thank you, love!” Giuliana said with surprise.

“Anyway, they won’t show us. Come on.”

Onesti called out, “Giuliana! Aren’t you going to wish me luck?”

“Ugo!” She rushed back and kissed his cheek.

“Mind the makeup,” warned the makeup man. He stomped away.

“We’re very proud of you, darling,” Giuliana said.

“Keep your chin up, Pa,” Vito said, “and don’t forget, look right into the camera.”

“You sound like Galli. We’ll get the boy running for office one of these days, too, won’t we, Giuliana?”

“Heaven forbid!” She went to take her seat.

“He could even run for president someday. I’ll pave the way, Vit’, and you can storm the ramparts. We’ll build a dynasty, eh?”

Vito sat down. Giuliana noticed the *Black Flag* still wadded up in Vito’s back pocket. “Oh, good, a newspaper. I haven’t seen a paper for two days, I’ve had so much to do, what with all these meetings Sig. Galli’s sending me to. I don’t even know what’s going on in the real world anymore.” She tried to pull the paper out of Vito’s pocket.

He snatched it from her hand. “That’s not the newspaper, Mama! It’s a ... a political paper I got from the Conservatives.”

“Oh, I don’t want that! Politics, politics, I can’t turn around without running into politics. I’m full up to here with all of it.” She sat down. “Why do you have a Conservative paper?”

“Have to keep up with what the enemy is plotting.” He slipped the *Black Flag* into his jacket pocket, out of sight.

“Good thinking,” Sig.ra Sette said.

“But I can’t figure out where all our newspapers have gone to. I know I paid the subscription just a few months ago.” Giuliana said.

“Who’s that?” Pietro asked suddenly, pointing.

“Eh?” Vito glanced at a man talking to his father. “Oh, that’s Domagio, don’t you recognize him? The television pundit.”

“That’s Domagio?” Giuliana said. “I thought he was taller.”

“He’s moderating the debate,” Vito explained. “I think he’s too conservative to be impartial.”

Pietro made a face at his brother. “You’re starting to sound just like a politician. These folks are the pros, they know what they’re doing.”

Vito rolled his eyes. “You’re so naive. All that studying and you still don’t know anything about the world. I’m not surprised you got your girlfriend pregnant.”

Pietro smacked Vito’s shoulder. Sig.ra Sette instantly intervened and pulled his hand away. “Pietro, stop it. Vito, that was unkind. Apologize.”

Vito said casually, “Sorry.”

“How heartfelt,” Sig.ra Sette snapped. “Sometimes I wonder if you two are actually brothers. My sister and I never ...”

The two brothers fidgeted at the beginning of the well-known story.

Anna and Davide came back into the hall and went to their seats in the front row alongside other reporters. They looked around the room. “Good crowd,” Anna commented.

“Yes. Odd for a by-election.”

“It’s an important election, restoring honor to Parliament.”

“It’s just had good publicity.”

“No thanks to the *Post*.”

The noise in the hall swelled until the lights flickered and everyone sat down. Stage center, the three candidates stood in a row at their lecterns, apparently chatting amicably amongst themselves. Stage left was the moderator’s desk. Stage right sat the candidates’ families. Ranged along the front of the stage were a dozen microphones, and right in the middle of the auditorium were the television cameras, modern Gorgons that, instead of transforming flesh to stone, could transform a winner into a loser, a star into an also-ran.

At last a technician signaled, the lights dimmed, and Sig. Domagio stepped out onto the stage. The audience politely applauded.

“So,” Davide Delsano said, “let the comedy begin.”

Anna elbowed him hard.

In his seat in the third row, Galli folded his hands and watched his protégé. So, he thought, the comedy begins.

On stage, Ugo Onesti thought, Look into the camera, look into the camera, look into the camera ...

Stage right, Giuliana prayed silently. Dear Lord, don’t let my Ugo make a fool of himself.

Pietro thought, God, I don’t want to be here ...

Vito leaned forward eagerly, clenching his teeth, wringing his hands. Oh, he thought, now the battle starts. Destroy the crooks!

Sig. Domagio bowed and waited for the applause to die down. “Thank you,” he said, “thank you. Good evening from the Armado Hall in Borgo. I am Sigismondo Domagio, your moderator. This evening’s debate marks an historic occasion for our province: the first political debate ever televised in Caprio.”

The audience applauded.

“Our three speakers are Yolanda Nova, candidate for the Progressive Party; Dario Canale, candidate for the Conservative Party; and Ugo Onesti, candidate for the Green Party. The debate will last one hour. The following rules will be observed: each candidate will present a two-minute opening statement. Questions will follow, each question being allowed a 90-second response and a 60-second rebuttal from the other candidates. Finally, the candidates will present

two-minute closing statements. These time limits will be strictly observed. The candidates are not allowed to directly address one another. Only I am allowed to present questions.

“Now, without further introduction, we’ll begin. Sig.ra Nova, may we have your opening statement.”

The next morning two headlines appeared in the morning papers: in the *National Post*

Conservative Triumph In Borgo

In The People’s Voice

Green Victory in Televised Debate

11

THE CABINET MEMBERS sat around the cherry table in the cabinet chamber. And sat. And sat. It was just past ten o'clock at night. They stared at their own and one another's reflections in the twelve mirrors that hung in the niches between the columns that lined the walls. Eufemia Frusoni tapped a pencil slowly on the table. Umberto Fedoro snored in a genteel manner.

"So," said Mauro Luca at last, "is he coming or not?"

"If he doesn't, I'll have a few rare words for him," Frusoni said.

"Not too rare," Vaghi laughed, "or he won't understand them."

"Then I'll give him a few even he won't have any trouble understanding. I know several languages."

Just then the door opened and President Zanni rushed in. Immediately behind him came Pucci, more slowly, and finally Angelica, carrying her steno pad and pencil. She scurried to a chair hidden in the corner and tried to make herself invisible.

"Lady and gentlemen, good evening," said the President. "Thanks for— Where's Salo?" He scowled ferociously.

Umberto Fedoro woke with a start. "Why does everyone always whisper? Must I remind you that I'm deaf? Speak up!"

Zanni roared, "*Where is Salo!*"

Fedoro winced and turned down his hearing aid. "Not so loud."

"Catastrophe is about to strike and where's the Vice President? Does anyone know?"

Pucci said calmly, "He made a speech in Utrizia tonight, he'll be back in the morning."

"Oh. Well, let's get down to business."

Angelica began to write.

"First, the matter of this former Conservative who's running against Canale in the provincial by-election."

Luca shook his head unhappily. "To change affiliation — very bad form."

"It's dangerous! He's getting too much support. People in Caprio think he's a hero, and that's Pucci's fault."

Pucci retained an expression of attentive ennui.

"We must nullify this error. Any ideas?"

Eufemia Frusoni said, "This was all your doing. You didn't consult us. You didn't ask our advice. You barged ahead without us, and now, now that events

have taken this course, you come to us for advice.”

The President glared at her. She glared back.

Pucci said quickly, “I accept responsibility for this, though it obviously was impossible to have foreseen such an outrageous complication, that this nonentity should actually run for office, and as a Green. However, I accept the responsibility.”

“Thank you, Reno Pucci. Since it’s all your fault, that’s very big of you. But we’re wasting time, as usual. I ask again,” said the President, “that you all come to the support of the Party and think of some way to make sure this provincial dunces does not disrupt our national politics.”

The ministers toyed with their notepads, studied their shoes, checked their reflections in the mirrors that lined the room.

The President threw up his hands. “You’re all worthless! The devil! That a Green — a Green! — could win is beyond the pale. And not only a Green, but a former Conservative! He must be stopped. Pucci, isn’t there any dirt you can dig up on him, some little sin we can exploit?”

Pucci shook his head. “There’s nothing. Not even a parking ticket. He’s a perfectly ordinary fellow.”

“Ordinary? What ordinary person has never done anything wrong in a lifetime? Good God, is there anyone that dull? There has to be something. No one’s completely honest.”

Pucci warned, “Remember, we made him famous, Sig. President. If we attack him now, and right before the by-election ...”

“Use someone else, of course, someone who has no apparent connection to us, like we did with Della Porte in the last election. Send someone down there to dig up anything we can use. What about that fellow from the *Post*? Delsano. No one worries about reporters, it’s their job to dig up dirt on people. He’s been helpful. Get him to find something embarrassing about this damned ex-Conservative. If he can’t find anything, let him make something up. A scandal of some kind, a Green scandal. Something we can make grow,” he said, happy with his near joke.

Angelica’s eyes went wide and her scratching pencil paused.

“Another scandal would keep the people occupied during this endless trial,” Zanni went on. “At any rate, I expect results. All right, that’s the first point. Point Two: the Mitek affair. Pucci has got hold of some interesting information. Pucci.” He sat.

Pucci did not stand to speak. “An acquaintance of mine in Roijna has informed me that this Mitek is in fact guilty of bribing a provincial bureaucrat, we aren’t sure who yet, and he’s also almost certainly guilty of manipulating the

clients of the factory owner. We know it. The Roijnan government knows it. Vlaamstad, the ambassador, has admitted it privately. There remains the question of how to use this information.”

Zanni looked at the cabinet. “So?”

The ministers peeked at one another. Angelica waited, pencil poised.

Luca finally said, “Aren’t we better off letting the whole ugly business die? If he did bribe somebody, so what? That’s how business gets done. We’ve all greased the wheels now and again in our careers. I think it’s dangerous to investigate. What happens if we find out it was a Conservative who took the bribe? Anyway, the people have already forgotten about it.”

“They forget what we allow them to forget!” Zanni shouted. “And I’m not allowing anyone to forget this until it’s been of use. They can forget about it after this damned election, but until then *I* decide if they forget or don’t, understand? Have you forgotten the Stanco trial? Have you forgotten that if we lose this seat, the Progressives and the Greens could join together to form an effective majority? And if they take the majority, how do you think *we*’ll be treated? What will *they* investigate?”

The ministers frowned with concern: not at the picture Zanni had painted, but at the expression in his eyes, the spittle that flew from his lips.

“Now,” Zanni said, “the question remains, how to use this news. So?”

Eufemia Frusoni said, “So? What do you mean, so? So what! What do you want us to say? This fellow Mitek has done something a little underhanded, well, what of it? The affair is over, Sig. President. To keep flogging it makes us ridiculous.”

Zanni’s eyes narrowed. “Ah. It’s over, is it? Doesn’t matter at all. But Stanco’s trial isn’t over yet. The by-election isn’t won yet!”

Vaghi tapped his chin. “But do we have any hard evidence?”

“Of course there’s evidence, didn’t you hear Pucci? They know he’s guilty! Straight from the source!” Zanni said.

Pucci looked at the ceiling. In fact, his source was one of Ambassador Vlaamstad’s secretaries, whom he bribed regularly on the off chance he might hear something of interest. But there was nothing he could produce in a court of law.

Frusoni demanded, “The international community will expect solid evidence. Can you produce solid evidence, Sig. President? If not...”

“We’ve got evidence, damn it. We’ve got evidence that the Roijnans are making fools of us. What are we going to do about it?”

Frusoni clenched her jaw. “Before we go any further, I’d like to see that evidence.”

“That’s not important. What to do now, *that’s* important.”

Eufemia Frusoni shifted in her seat. “Not important, oh, very good!”

“Pardon me? Are you defying me?” Zanni hissed. His face hardened, his eyes took on a gleam none of them had seen before. Since the demonstration at the Opera there had been two others: the first during a routine speech at a business conference — the whole audience had risen to its feet at his entrance and broken into wild cheers; the second during a visit to a children’s care center in Griban Province — the children had presented him with a charmingly ugly plaque that read “Defending Our Borders.” Both demonstrations had been arranged secretly by Pucci, inspired by Sig.ra Zanni’s success at the Opera, and with each demonstration Zanni’s pride had grown. He felt stronger, more popular, more certain of himself, and increasingly heroic.

Frusoni bridled. “I only said—”

“If you are defying me, get out.”

She gaped. “What?”

Maybe just a bit too heroic, Pucci thought.

“Get out,” the President said again. “Get out. Now. If you’re not with me, you’re against me. I will not allow, I will not tolerate a traitor in our midst.”

Pucci closed his eyes at this distant echo of his speechwriting talents.

Frusoni paled. “Traitor?”

“Are you going?”

Vaghi said soothingly, “Sig. President, of course Sig.ra Frusoni didn’t mean ... such language isn’t ...”

“You too, Dionisios?” Zanni whirled on the minister. “Do you have something to say? Do I need to find a new Finance Minister?”

Vaghi also paled.

In her corner, Angelica watched with eyes goggling. She had never witnessed the President in such a temper. He often cursed, fumed, stormed, blasphemed, and recently he had been more demanding than usual. More decisive. He made decisions even where no decisions were required. He ordered the Palace guards pointlessly from door to door. He ordered the cleaning staff to empty the wastebaskets just so. He decided this and decided that, until it was hard to get any real work done. Once he had stood at Angelica’s shoulder and dictated to her letter by letter, as if he did not trust her to type accurately. She almost dreaded coming to work in the morning. But this ...

Zanni stood, put his hands on the table, and leaned forward. “We will decide how to make use of this information. Do you understand?”

All the cabinet members, even Fedoro, nodded.

“Good. We understand each other. Angelica.”

The secretary's hand jerked so that she nearly dropped her pad. "Yes, Sig. President."

"Strike out that last discussion."

"Yes, sir."

"History does not need a record of our infrequent misunderstandings."

"Yes, sir."

Zanni sat down again. "Now," he continued, "since we're all in agreement about the grave importance of the Mitek affair, the question remains how to deal with this new information. If Roijna refuses to acknowledge our charges, we must act to obtain justice. We will have to prosecute."

Vaghi opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. "Excuse me," he said, "but this Mitek ... he's from Roijna."

"Good of you to be able to retrieve that fact from your memory, Sig. Minister."

"I mean, he's not a citizen of Serenno."

"Another brilliant statement of the obvious."

Vaghi swallowed. "I mean, he's a foreigner."

"May we assume you're leading up to something?"

He gestured helplessly. "Well, what I mean is, we can't do anything to him. We don't have any jurisdiction over him. All we could do is bring a civil suit in the Roijnan courts, and that would hardly ..."

Zanni's brow darkened. "He's a criminal."

"Perhaps, perhaps," Vaghi said, "but he's not under our jurisdiction. We can't just sneak into Roijna and grab him." His eyes immediately widened with dread at what he had unwittingly suggested. The others waited with fearful anticipation.

"That's a good point." Zanni looked at Pucci. "How do we get him back into Serenno?"

The ministers gasped.

Zanni turned purple. "I'm not suggesting we kidnap him, you idiots! Do you think I'm going to send troops out to catch one man? This isn't the United States. Pucci, how can we get him to come to Serenno of his own choice?"

Pucci felt as profound a shock at this suggestion as did the others, but his expression did not change. He took a deep breath. "That ... might be possible."

"Go on."

"Hm. We might ... We could invite Mitek to a meeting."

Zanni's color changed from purple to something rosier and healthier. "Invite him. I like that."

"Yes," Pucci went on with more confidence. "But we wouldn't necessarily

need to prosecute. If we could just get him to admit to these charges in a way we could use..."

"Use how?"

"Well, for example, if he confessed that the bureaucrat he bribed wasn't a Conservative."

Zanni grinned. "That's good! Then we could slam it to the Progressives. But are there any Progressives in the Borgo administration?"

Pucci felt a great calm descend. "I don't know about that. But there is a Green."

All sat silent for a moment.

Zanni sprang out of his chair. "That's beautiful! Two fish on one hook! Pucci, you're a genius!"

Pucci allowed himself a small, relieved smile.

Vaghi said, "But what if the fellow won't come?"

Pucci shrugged. "He'll come if we offer something he wants."

"Like what?"

"The munitions factory."

Silence.

"This Mitek has already gone to a lot of trouble to get the factory, legally or illegally," Pucci said. "He's spent a lot of money, he certainly won't want to write all that off. He'll come. And to get it, he'll say whatever we want him to say."

"But we can't let him have it," the President said. "The papers would eat us alive."

"Dante was near bankruptcy, that's why he's selling. Hundreds of workers will be laid off, a significant source of tax revenue will disappear if the factory closes. Mitek wants the factory, Mitek will keep it open. That's a major selling point to the people. And to be safe, we won't close the deal till after the election. We can keep it quiet till then, and after the election it won't matter."

The President pushed back his chair. "Do you really think it will work?"

"Oh, I think so."

The ministers looked at one another with queasy incomprehension.

Zanni nodded. "Good. That's that. Anyone have anything else to propose?"

No one dared speak.

"Then it's decided. Pucci, you arrange the meeting as soon as possible. And don't forget about Delsano. Put him on the Onesti story. Discreetly. Whatever he can find to help us." He stood. "Any other business?"

No one spoke.

"You'll be contacted when we've arranged the meeting with Mitek. Good

night.” He left.

Angelica leaped up and skipped after him. Pucci pushed himself away from the table, rose to his feet, bowed to the ministers, and followed. The door slowly swung shut behind him.

The ministers remained seated. Seconds tiptoed by.

Finally Luca said, “I think he’s finally gone stark, staring mad.”

“Ssh!” Vaghi whispered. “He might hear you.”

“Hear?” Luca looked around fearfully. “How? He’s gone.”

“Even the bricks in the walls will gossip if it’s to their advantage.”

“Oh damn ...” Luca said, but he shut up.

“Gentlemen,” Eufemia Frusoni whispered, “I don’t trust myself to speak about what we’ve just witnessed. Maybe we could go somewhere a little more private.”

Vaghi whispered, “Good idea.”

Fedoro also whispered. “I can’t hear you.”

“We didn’t say anything,” Vaghi said loudly, looking around. “Nothing at all. Let’s get out of here, my friends. I feel the need of a drink.”

Frusoni stood. “Something strong.”

The others nodded and stood.

Angelica trotted along behind Zanni, who strode through the halls to his office spitting out orders. He looked younger. His cheeks flamed, his eyes shone — a desert prophet who had just delivered a particularly gratifying anathema. Pucci appeared, his enormous bulk filling the doorway. Zanni clapped his hands with glee. “Did you see that, Pucci? Sheep! They’re all sheep! The way I let Frusoni have it, that hag, always mouthing off to me. Well, no more!”

Angelica slipped unnoticed into her office and sat down at her desk. She could hear the President crowing like a rooster over his little triumph. She started to type up her notes, pounding at the keys, pounding harder and harder to drown out the voice in the other office.

After almost twenty minutes of executive glee, Zanni yawned and bid Pucci good night. Italo Grop, who had been waiting quietly all evening in the President’s office, put away the book he’d been reading — a decent translation of *Gulliver’s Travels* — and silently followed the leader through the halls and out the door to the limousine. Zanni, in high spirits, said to the big man, “Beautiful night, isn’t it?”

Grop showed no expression. “Thank you, sir.”

“It’s the kind of night when a man could conquer the world.”

Grop politely did not reply. He opened the car door and held it while the

President crawled in, then pressed himself into the front seat and woke the chauffeur.

Pucci remained in the President's office and bit his lip. The events of the night spun round and round in his head. He thought, What have I done? What have I made? But the answers to those questions did not bear thought. He put them aside.

He heard typing in the next room, went to the connecting door and opened it.

Angelica startled when he did. "Oh, Sig. Pucci! I thought you'd gone with the President." She twisted at her hair with one trembling hand.

Pucci said gently, "It's very late, Angelica. You should go home. Surely your notes can wait till tomorrow."

She managed a nervous smile. "If I don't type it right away, I'll forget everything."

If only, Pucci thought. He smiled wearily, nodded, "Good night." He closed the door. "Good night."

He sat behind the President's desk and picked up the receiver, dialed, waited. He breathed calmly as it rang twice, three times, four, five. Rubbed his eyes, scratched his nose.

Someone answered. "'Lo?" said a sleepy voice.

"Delsano."

Without hesitation: "Pucci. What can I do for you?"

"Just a friendly call, Davide."

"At ... midnight?"

"Is it that late? Sorry, I hadn't noticed the time. I can call back tomorrow."

"No, no," Delsano said through a yawn, "go ahead. I'm listening."

"How are you?" Pucci continued the charade.

"A little tired."

"Ah."

"I'm covering the festival, you know. Very interesting. I interview the artists, telephone them wherever they are around the world, so I'm working odd hours. Sig.ra Zanni wants something in the paper every day. Yesterday I interviewed a Finnish theater director whose company is performing a Japanese Noh play. Finns presenting Japanese plays!" He chuckled. "And today I interviewed an American puppeteer."

"He speaks our language?"

"Of course not. Barely speaks English. At least, I could hardly understand him. Went on and on about aesthetic theories of 'object performance' and 'the puppet as mask' and 'is a puppet show living theater or dead theater?' It takes a real writer to turn that into a decent column."

Pucci, still looking out the window, roused himself. "Yes, yes, you're definitely the man to handle that. And since you mentioned filling up those columns ..."

He could almost hear Delsano shut his eyes in resignation.

"Yes," Delsano said.

"Of course I wouldn't presume to tell you how to do your job, but it might be a good idea if you looked into that Green running out in Borgo, that Ugo Onesti."

"The by-election, hm. Look into what, for instance?"

Pucci also hummed. "Hm, I couldn't say. But I've heard some disturbing rumors."

"Which you kindly pass on to me. Thanks. What do you want me to write?"

"No, no, Davide, I wouldn't dream of dictating. But if you went to Borgo, you'd probably learn about some irregularities your readers would eagerly gobble up."

"I've been to Borgo. I didn't hear anything interesting. And the festival..."

"Sig.ra Zanni would be more than happy for you to look into the Onesti matter."

A moment of sullen silence followed.

"Well, then," Delsano said abruptly, "if I'm going to Borgo, I'd better get some sleep, hadn't I?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm keeping you up."

Delsano did not contradict him.

"I'll say good night then. Always a pleasure chatting with you, Davide."

"Yes, Pucci. Good night."

They hung up. Pucci leaned back in the President's chair and stretched. The chair groaned. The sound of typing in the other room had stopped: Angelica had gone home after all. The Federal Palace was silent. Probably no one around but a guard or two napping downstairs. He kicked off one shoe. The familiar odor of his sweaty foot rose comfortingly to his nostrils. He kicked off the other shoe. The susurrations of the late-night traffic beyond the thick window glass was as soothing as the ocean. In a moment he was sound asleep.

Davide Delsano was not asleep. He raged and cursed and made obscene gestures. "Fat ass!" he screamed at no one. The framed prints on his walls rattled. "Go to Borgo! Like I don't have anything better to do!" His silk pajamas fluttered around his skinny legs. "Son of a lice-ridden whore! Snaps his fingers and expects me to jump! If I could get my fingers around that fat neck ... the pig. No, no, that's an insult to pigs." His bare feet went clack clack clack on the

hardwood floor, fluff fluff fluff on the expensive Turkish carpet as he paced. “Oh, wouldn’t I like to kick his flabby butt! ‘Davide, drop everything, run off to the ends of the earth, there’s a good boy!’ The big-bellied bastard! Am I some sort of puppy dog? I’m Delsano! First-string reporter at the *National Post*, damn it! What does he think, he owns me?”

He drooped. “Yes. That’s exactly what he thinks.”

He sat in the dark while the stars slowly turned in the heavens, unconcerned with lowly human frustrations. But Davide Delsano was not a man who considered the universal. For him, the universe began and ended with himself. He had worked hard through the years to reach the top of his profession. He had started in a provincial village as the child of a car mechanic and a stenotypist. He went to a decent school and then an excellent university, where he made the right friends to ease his way later. One of those friends got him on the regional paper in Fastina, where he soon distinguished himself with a series of articles about local smuggling. The one or two death threats he’d received as a result were profitable: he was invited to the *Post*. On to Fricchi, and he never looked back. He won an award or two, his articles got better and better, he developed a blandly witty style that compensated for his lack of substance. Now the government had noticed him, and when they needed something or other — a discreet notice, a convenient leak of information, a broad hint at an opponent’s peccadilloes — he was happy to help them out. He wrote quickly and easily, without much effort. Chief editor Nazario was happy, the readers were happy, the paper’s owners were enthusiastic. Ergo the Turkish carpet, the silk pajamas, the apartment on the twentieth floor on Guarrera Boulevard, just south of the Central Plaza.

“No!” he yelled at no one. “I will *not* go to Borgo! That hole. How anybody can stand living there I can’t figure out. Two barely decent restaurants, a miserable bakery, and that hotel! I couldn’t take another night in that bed. No! And besides, I’ve got interviews scheduled. Tomorrow’s that Canadian tenor. No, I’m not going. But that Pucci, how to shut him up? I’ll have to find somebody else to go instead. ‘Look into this Onesti,’ good grief, like there’s anything there! Who?”

Despite his years at the *Post*, he had no real friends among the staff. In fact, no one there other than the owners and Nazario liked him much. He had to think of someone who needed a lead like this. Someone young, someone ambitious, out to make a name for himself and hungry for a real story. He thought hard. He never really noticed his coworkers much. Who might be promising?

One face appeared in his imagination, a woman’s face, frustrated, angry, always coming out of Nazario’s office near tears. What was her name?

The sleepy voice that answered his call was phlegmatic and not at all musical. “Wha? Hello? Maria here.”

“Maria Santata?”

“Yes, Maria Santata.” She was beginning to come awake and was not welcoming.

“It’s Davide Delsano.”

She was wide awake now, and her tone shifted to friendly confusion. “What? Oh, Sig. Delsano!”

“I’m sorry to call so late. I’ve obviously woken you.”

“No, yes, really, it’s no bother, Sig. Delsano, I was just dozing.”

“Do forgive me, Signorina.” Davide could be charming when he had something to gain from it. “But it’s important and couldn’t wait till morning. Tell me, are you involved in any project at the moment?”

“Project? Oh, you mean at work. I have that gardening article, Sig. Nazario told me to—”

“Gardening? Fascinating. Tell me, Maria, have you any desire to move into politics?”

“Politics.”

“Yes, politics.”

“Well, I — yes, of course! I mean, what reporter wouldn’t—”

Delsano grinned. “You’ve heard about this by-election out in Caprio Province? The Stanco scandal.”

“Yes. Stanco, yes, I’ve heard about that.”

Ah, youth. Eager, malleable youth. “Good. I was hoping you could help me out of a bind. I’m covering the festival, all those interviews, you know the series I’ve been writing, but I’ve heard something disturbing that should not be ignored. How would you like to go out to Borgo, do some investigating?”

“Sig. Delsano! Investigating? Really?”

“Yes. There’ve been rumors about the ... tell me, are you a supporter of any particular party?”

She hesitated. “Supporter. Of course. I’m ... a Conservative?”

He donned a tone of hearty gratitude. “I knew you’d be just the person for this assignment. I’d go myself if it was at all possible, but with the festival taking up all my time, of course I thought of you. I’ve been very impressed with your work, and I think this might be the sort of story you could really sink your teeth into.”

“You’ve been reading my work?”

“Oh, I’ve had my eye on you for a while, Maria.”

“Well! Of course I’d be happy to help out. Sig. Nazario is expecting my

gardening article, but...”

“I’ll fix that for you. You’ll need to leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.”

“First thing in the morning.”

“Right.”

“The first train is at six.”

“I’ll be there!”

“Wonderful. Now, you understand this is a very important assignment, maybe the most important story of the year.”

“Really?”

“You’ll need to find out the truth about Ugo Onesti.”

“Onesti. Got it.”

“Do some real digging. Find out what this Onesti is hiding. Anything that makes him unfit for office. As a Conservative,” he said carefully, “you understand what we’re looking for.”

A moment of silence. Then, “Yes, Sig. Delsano. I think I understand.”

“Good. There must be something, and we’ll expect you to find it. Anything at all that might not show him in the best light. How you do it isn’t important.”

“Yes, I understand.”

He smiled to himself. “Then I’ll let you get some rest.”

“I’ll be on the six o’clock train.”

“Very good. When you arrive in Borgo give me a call at the office, I can point you to some leads.”

“Thank you, Sig. Delsano. I’m very grateful for this opportunity.” Her voice did not precisely express gratitude. “I’ve always been a fan of yours.”

“Thank you, Maria. That’s sweet. We’ll talk tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Delsano went to bed content. He would not go to Borgo. He would not have to stay in that rotten hotel. And he was unselfishly helping a young reporter along the same path he had traveled so successfully in his own career. It was a pleasant feeling, to help a child in her first stumbling steps. She would call tomorrow, probably at some inconvenient time, but that’s the price a mentor must pay. Tonight his bed was delightfully soft, and if he slept a little late he’d be fresh as a daisy for that interview with the Canadian tenor.

12

SIG.RA SETTE SAID GOODBYE to her friend Lena Bolla at the door of the bistro. They'd had a tasty lunch and chatted about anything and everything, but mostly about Ugo's candidacy and how this had disrupted the family routine. It was now almost two o'clock; Sig.ra Bolla tended to go on and on. Sig.ra Sette wandered down the via Camerra, glanced in the shop windows, enjoyed the brilliant sunshine. Usually she had a routine — in the morning, a cup of coffee with Giuliana, then help with the housework; at noon, lunch at home or out with a friend; in the afternoon, a trip to the library, or perhaps a movie, a little shopping, or helping out at Sig.ra Nova's headquarters, making phone calls or stuffing envelopes. But she could not do that now, not since Ugo had decided to run as a Green. A Green! she thought. Who would have imagined it? It was that Galli who had convinced him. Converted him, more like. Not that it wasn't good that Ugo had found something constructive to do at last. And thank goodness he was not running as a Conservative! He was doing well, too, no one could deny he had a flair for politics, though she would never have believed it possible. Quiet little Ugo, mild, unassuming Ugo, who had never done anything more political than making speeches at the dinner table, repeating whatever he'd last heard on the television. Why, she herself, Grazia Sette, would be more credible as a politician!

She found herself at via Oprava, the very opposite direction she'd meant to go. She wondered idly why she had wandered that way, and then it struck her: she did not want to go home.

How foolish. Not want to go home? Silly!

But she felt a tightness around her lungs at the thought. It was true. She did not want to go home. She did not want to be around her son-in-law. But she loved him dearly. Ugo was a good man, a very good man, Giuliana could not have done better. Never a moment's trouble between them, and he treated Sig.ra Sette like his own mother. Not want to go home — what a terrible realization! It was all that Galli's fault. That damned Green, slinking into their happy home like a serpent and tempting him to run. When Ugo was a Conservative, it was easy to contradict his old empty, rote arguments, and their political disputes were comfortably invigorating. But now that he was a Green ... how could she cope with that? She had no arguments at hand to refute his new empty, rote arguments, her usual array of facts and figures did not fit. It had all become most confusing.

A voice interrupted her contemplation. "Excuse me, Signora, but do you need help?"

Sig.ra Sette turned to find a young woman in a black dress and jacket, with brown hair tied behind her head. "Eh? Why, no, thank you."

"You seem disturbed."

"No, not at all, thanks very much." Sig.ra Sette quickly ran one hand along her hair to ensure all was in order. "I was just thinking about something."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I hope I didn't embarrass you."

A pleasant young woman. Rather pretty, though she had that blank, untouched, mass-produced face so many young people suffered from these days. No character in it. But pretty. "You didn't embarrass me at all, thank you. Actually, it's nice to meet a young person who bothers about us old folks. It's more than one expects these days."

The young woman smiled. "We're not all self-absorbed with cellphones in our hands and headphones in our ears. In fact, I was rather worried you were going to do yourself a mischief."

Sig.ra Sette looked at her, puzzled. Then she took in her surroundings and found that she was at the promenade above the river, standing next to the barrier. She stepped back hurriedly. "Oh!" she cried out. "Oh, no! No, I was just thinking, dear, just thinking. Heavens!" She put a hand on her breast.

"Please don't worry, Signora. I was just being silly."

"Well, maybe a bit melodramatic." She managed a chuckle. "But it is nice of you, taking the trouble to stop." She turned to go.

The woman said quickly, "Excuse me, Signora, but maybe *you* could help *me*. I'm looking for a café around here somewhere, the Café Ris? I think it's on via Calvino. Can you point me in the right direction?"

Sig.ra Sette said, "The Café Ris? Of course, dear. I live just up the street from there. You come with me, I'll show you the way. What a coincidence!"

"Yes, isn't it."

"I hope you don't mind walking. I walk everywhere when the weather's good, like today. Exercise keeps one young."

"It doesn't matter to me. I'll be late in any case."

"Good. When I was a girl I used to bicycle all over town, but now my knees give me trouble. It's no picnic, getting older."

They walked along the river together without a word. After they had passed a few streets, the young woman said, "I hope I'm not prying, but what were you thinking about back there? You looked as if the world had just fallen on your head."

Sig.ra Sette blushed. "Did I? It was nothing important, really. A personal

matter, you wouldn't be interested."

"Still, if you'd like to talk about it."

"I wouldn't dream of boring you." Sig.ra Sette clutched her purse and realized that she would indeed very much like to talk about it.

"Oh, if it's personal..."

"Well, personal, yes, but also rather public. You see," she said with sudden decision, "my son-in-law is running for Parliament."

"Really?" said the young woman. "How exciting. So you're related to Dario Canale?"

"Not Canale, no, thank heavens. Oh, I didn't mean that! My son-in-law is Ugo Onesti, the Green Party candidate."

The woman nodded. "Oh yes, I've heard of him. That is impressive."

"I suppose it is. But of course it's caused quite a stir in our family."

"You're not enjoying the public life?"

"Oh, I've always been involved politically myself. I used to be quite active, always involved in one protest or another. And I still help out—" She caught herself.

"Do you?" the young woman asked eagerly.

Sig.ra Sette did not finish her sentence. "I was very active. I would march for any good cause. For freedom, against war, for justice. I was quite the agitator, in a small way."

"How exciting. Young people today aren't as involved politically as they should be."

Sig.ra Sette turned to the young woman with interest. "That's just what I often say. Few people take an interest anymore. Though my grandson is starting to..."

"But if that's the case, what's troubling you about your son-in-law's running for office? I should think you'd be proud."

"Oh, I am!" Sig.ra Sette said. "Ugo is a wonderful man, a good man, generous to a fault. Why, he's not just my son-in-law, he's practically my own child. But..." she hesitated, then plunged on. "But you see, I'm a Progressive."

The young woman smiled encouragingly. "Are you?"

"I'm a Progressive. You understand. A Progressive, and he's running as a Green. What can I do? I want to support him, but I have a hard time turning my back on my principles." She shrugged wearily. "It's very troubling."

The young woman asked, "But of course you'll vote for him, won't you? You'll vote Green?"

Sig.ra Sette did not respond immediately. She walked more and more slowly, then stopped. She looked at the young woman and said firmly, "You know, I don't think I will. No. I must keep hold of my convictions, mustn't I? I think I

must. Otherwise, why have convictions at all? I'll vote for Sig.ra Nova. Yes." She walked on again with determination, her chin thrust out before her.

"Brava!" the young woman said. "And will you tell your son-in-law about this?"

Sig.ra Sette turned, the picture of horror. "Good Lord, no! I'd never hurt him so. Poor man. Oh! Here we are."

"Hmm?"

"The Café Ris, right there across the street."

The woman nodded. "Oh, yes, yes. We were having such an interesting talk, I almost forgot where I was going. Well, thank you, Signora."

"I'm glad I could help."

The young woman smiled. "Oh, you have helped, believe me, more than you know. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, dear."

The young woman crossed the street and entered the café. Sig.ra Sette walked on to her house. What a nice girl, she thought. Why can't there be more young people like her...

The apartment was in chaos: unwashed laundry lay jumbled on the floors, dirty dishes tottered on chairs, shelves, tables, the television. Sig.ra Sette sighed. Giuliana, as wife of the candidate, had to make almost as many appearances at meetings, presentations, and public events as Ugo, and she herself, Sig.ra Sette, had lately been no help at all. Instead of buckling down and keeping the household in order during this difficult time, she was out wandering the streets, lamenting her fate, getting mistaken for a would-be suicide! Shameful. She immediately took off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves. She would start in the kitchen. Some hard work would banish her depression.

Vito was at the kitchen table with a stack of books. His head was in his hands as he read. When his grandmother entered, he jumped and slammed shut the book. "Grandmama!" he cried.

"I'm glad to see someone else is here, Vit'. I thought you were all out giving speeches."

"Mama's at a ladies' martial arts club. I don't know why, Mama doesn't do martial arts." He turned the books so the titles were not visible. "Pa's doing some interview on television or radio. I don't know where Pietro is."

Sig.ra Sette had put on an apron. She clapped her hands. "Good! You can help me get this filthy place tidied up. If they're all busy, we can at least do our duty. You start in the living room, I'll wash these dishes. Oh, Lord, look how many there are."

Vito hemmed and hawed. "But I have to go ..."

“Go where?”

“I have to be somewhere.”

She turned from the sink and fixed her eye on him. “You, too? And no doubt the fate of the world hangs in the balance.”

“It’s important to me.” He gathered up his books.

“When do you have to be there?”

“Six.”

“Well, it’s only just three.” She turned on the tap. “We can have the whole place spotless before dinner.”

“But I have to read ...”

She did not turn round. “Mm? What are you reading?”

Vito stuttered.

“What’s all this? Lessons of some kind?”

“I’ll start in the living room!” He grabbed his books and rushed out.

In his room he shoved the books into his backpack: *The Paris Commune* by Kropotkin, *The Organization of Society* and *The Vestibule* (already dog-eared) by Mirbeau, Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, and two cheaply printed journals, *Down With Everything!* and *A Contrary Position*. Then he went out to tidy the living room. There was a plate on the floor by a chair, crusty with ancient potatoes. A fork was stuck behind one cushion. Two glasses and several cups half-filled with coffee were discovered in various places. A spoon and bowl sticky with some nameless substance were turned upside down on the television. He piled them all together and started toward the kitchen, but the spoon flew out and skittered across the floor under a chair. He muttered a curse, bent down to pick it up, and saw something else poking out from under the chair. He pulled on it and found it was a newspaper. When he looked closer, he found a stack of newspapers hidden under the chair. A good two weeks’ worth of the *Borgo Evening Sun*. Mama had been wondering why they had not been receiving their subscription, but as busy as they all were, no one had bothered to call to find out. He pulled the papers into the middle of the room just as the door opened and Pietro entered.

“About time,” Vito said. “You can help. Grandmama’s on a mission to clean the whole place.”

Pietro immediately noticed the pile of newspapers and went white. Then a step sounded on the stairs behind him and he leaped forward as Giuliana appeared. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “what a day! Those karate women are crazy, they just about deafened me with their screaming ‘hai!’ and ‘hoy!’ and ‘ai-ya!’” Pietro, Vito, my loves, how nice to find you home.”

Pietro grabbed up the newspapers and ran past his mother and down the

stairs. Giuliana watched him, surprised. “Darling, where are you—” But he was gone. She shrugged and entered the apartment. “What are you all up to?”

“Grandmama’s cleaning.”

Giuliana smiled. “Incredible. She’s got you cleaning? So politics has a purpose after all.” She took off her coat. “But after jumping up and down all morning with those madwomen, nothing surprises me.”

“Did they attack you?” Vito asked.

“It felt like it. First I gave that speech Sig. Galli wrote for me. I think it went fairly well, but really, I don’t like giving speeches. I can talk for hours, God knows, but a speech just doesn’t feel natural. No one likes sitting through them, they only do so because they feel they should. Then they asked a few questions, which I was actually able to answer, and then! Then they got into white pajamas and started their contortions. They tried to get me to join in, but I politely declined. So they surrounded me like bacchantes, leaping up and down and here and there like big white grasshoppers. It was exhausting just to watch. If I didn’t know Sig.ra Corelli there, I’d have been afraid for my life. Where’s mama?”

“In the kitchen. You can hear her throwing dishes around.”

“I can’t hear anything after this morning. I’ll never be able to hear again. Farewell to music. Farewell to tender cooings of filial devotion from my children’s lips.” She went into the kitchen.

Onesti returned at dinnertime, as tired as his wife and, after her cleaning frenzy, Sig.ra Sette. “Ah,” he drawled on sitting at the table, “a home-cooked meal at last! Look at these noodles and sausage! It’s like a treaty after war.” He sliced up his kielbasa and chewed. “Magnificent! I didn’t eat like this at lunch, I can tell you. You never saw such pathetic excuses for fritters. Barely edible. But I had to get them down somehow and smile doing it. Ah, yes, Giuliana, I would like a splash of wine, thank you. Now I can relax and enjoy myself for a few minutes. It’s good to have us all together for a change. Galli obviously slipped up somewhere in his calendar or we’d never have managed it. I was beginning to wonder if I’d ever see any of you again.”

Giuliana refilled his glass and said, “Ugo, that’s exactly what’s been bothering me. If you do win this election, if you have to go to Fricchi to Parliament, when are we going to see you? When will we be able to sit down to dinner together as a family?”

“But darling, of course if I win you’ll all be going to Fricchi with me.”

Everyone halted in mid-chew.

Onesti looked up at the four frozen faces before him.

Giuliana swallowed. “We’re going to Fricchi with you?”

“Of course. What did you think?”

“Well,” she stammered, “I don’t know ... I thought ... I don’t know what I thought, but it certainly wasn’t that we’d all be going to Fricchi to live.”

Vito exclaimed, “I have to go to Fricchi?”

“Mm-hmm.” Onesti carefully balanced a wad of noodles and sausage and a blot of mustard on his fork.

Vito’s eyes widened. “But school!”

“Believe it or not, there are schools in Fricchi. Very good schools, even better than here.”

“But ... But ...”

“Oh, Ugo,” Giuliana said, “we’re not going to drag Vito out of school just before he graduates!”

Onesti looked up with a puzzled expression. “It’s two years before he graduates. What’s the matter? We won’t be leaving Borgo forever. I’ll be the provincial member, of course I have to live here. But while Parliament’s in session we’ll live in Fricchi. Did you think I’d go to Fricchi to live all winter by myself and only come see you in the summer? Giuliana, surely you understand that, as a member of Parliament, I’ll need to do a certain amount of entertaining, going out to dinner parties and functions and such. You’ll have to be there with me. And when we give a party, you can knock those big-city snobs down with your wonderful kielbasa.”

She stared down at her plate. “I didn’t think ... I just hadn’t thought ... I suppose...” She dropped her fork with a clatter and covered her face with both hands.

“Giuliana!”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m so tired.” She stood and went into the kitchen.

Vito jumped up from his chair. “I have to go!” He ran to his room.

Onesti called out, “Stop right there, young man. Where do you think—?” But Vito had already disappeared. “Vito, I asked where—” They heard Vito zoom out of the apartment like a small tornado. “Vito!” The door slammed shut.

Onesti looked at the remainder of his family. “Any other tantrums before dessert?”

Vito walked quickly north and west, away from the river, away from home, north into the small, twisting lanes where the buildings were old and the apartments were cheap, attracting Borgo’s small population of students and foreigners. Vito had seldom visited these neighborhoods, and never alone. The odor of unknown foods drifted out of the windows, foreign smells, spicy and unrecognizable. Strange, dark faces sat in the doorways and at the windows, babbling in languages he could not recognize. Somehow, he thought, anything said in a foreign language sounds like an argument. Twilight climbed out of the

corners, crept along the walls, called the vermin out of their lairs, mincing, squealing creatures that scampered about in halos of jumping fleas and fluttering mites. Vito pulled a ragged copy of *Black Flag* out of his backpack and checked the address again. Vicolo Pennone, 29, it had to be somewhere around here. What a miserable place! So narrow he could almost touch the buildings on either side of the road just by stretching out his arms. Cobblestones were still torn up from some half-completed repair, and the lone streetlight gave just enough of a glow to show how dark it really was. But he squared his shoulders. If Kropotkin could get through a Russian prison camp alive, Vito could walk up this dark alley.

He found the building. A red light glowed on the wall, and under it a small sign displayed, in faded letters, "The Green Cockatoo." An indeterminate smudge on the sign had probably once depicted that fabled bird. The door was several slimy steps below street level. All right, he thought, okay, doors don't open themselves. He went down the steps and pushed inside.

The bar was a huge cellar with a low, beamed ceiling shrouded in clouds of cigarette smoke that stung his eyes. The air reeked of beer. Vito felt his heart beating fast. This was the real thing, the hotbed of the proletariat. Some thirty or forty people sat at the tables and the bar, smoking, drinking, talking, talking, arguing, no doubt plotting dreadful crimes against the state. A dangerous-looking crowd, lots of mustaches and beards, even among the women. Here was life underground, real life, straight out of a novel by Dostoevski.

The door opened behind him and a young woman came in, wearing a black dress and jacket, her brown hair tied behind her. She glanced at him and pushed past.

He followed her down the steps and among the tables, catching bits of conversation as he weaved his way toward the back of the room. At one table sat two men, both the spitting image of Trotsky. One of the two banged a fist on the table with revolutionary fervor. "No, no, no!" he yelled. "Maria Callas was, is, and always will be the greatest of all Toscas!"

"Tebaldi," the other said calmly.

"Callas!"

"No, Tebaldi, Renata Tebaldi."

"You don't know crap about opera!"

"I know that cow Pacetti can't find a pitch to save her soul."

The first man roared with laughter. "You've got that right!"

Vito did not understand a word of this. He moved on past a table where three very thin women sat. He heard one say, "She's got no taste at all. Do you know, I saw her wearing pink shoes with a blue skirt, can you believe it."

“Awful!” said one of the others. “She is so bizarre.”

“It’s as if she *works* at it,” said the third.

At another table a man with long, greasy hair and a thick beard was saying to two women, “Herzog’s *Aguirre*, do you know it? Classic. Best film ever made, without peer. There’s a scene in the second half that really captures the whole miasma of twentieth-century politics ...”

A big man, dressed in a black tee-shirt and black leather pants, suddenly loomed before Vito like the wrath of God. “Hey, kid, what are you up to here? How old are you?”

“Twenty.” Vito winced. He had never been able to lie convincingly.

“Oh, twenty, huh? And I’m Little Bo-Peep.”

“Well, sixteen, and so what? I’m legal. Anyway, I’m not going to drink. I’m looking for the Black Flag—”

A voice called out, “There’s my little politician!” The big man moved aside to reveal Sergio, the young man from the library. “So you really showed up! Probably to spy. He looks like a spy, doesn’t he, Olmsted?”

“Looks like any other punk to me.” The big man snorted and stalked off.

“You’re not a spy, are you?” Sergio said.

“No! No, I just came ...”

“Why?”

“Just to see what you’re all about. Your group, I mean.” Vito felt cold sweat trickling down the back of his neck. “I’ve been reading—”

Sergio gave a knowing smile. “Uh-huh. And then you’ll report back to Papa all our antisocial doings so he can bust us up and score some points before the election.”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Vito said desperately. “He doesn’t even know I’m here.”

Sergio shook his long hair so it curled fetchingly around his Byronic face. “Don’t get all worked up, I’m just joking with you. He doesn’t have a chance of winning.”

Vito said indignantly, “I think he does! There are a lot of people who are sick and tired of the way the Conservatives are screwing up our country and—”

“Whoa!” Sergio cried. “If you’re going to start with the speeches, you’d better come on back and give it to the whole group. We’re at that table over there.”

He led Vito to a long table where seven men and women sat. One young woman, who had the whitest skin and blackest hair Vito had ever seen, narrowed her eyes and said to Sergio, “Who’s the brat?”

Vito unconsciously stood up on his toes, almost reaching Sergio’s chin.

“Hey, guys,” Sergio said. He slapped his hand on Vito’s shoulder and pushed

him forward. "This is the kid from the library I told you about."

"Ah," said a bald man with a gray beard. "Another protégé."

Vito blushed. So did Sergio, but Vito did not see that.

"Don't be mean, the kid's into politics. Hey, at least he's into something besides computer games and drugs."

A man with thick glasses raised his beer and toasted, "To one of the few."

"Into politics, eh?" said a young woman. "And you naturally come check out the anarchists."

Vito said, "I ... I'm not prejudiced ..."

"Very big of you," said an older woman who was smoking a brown cigarette. She looked the same age as his mother. He had not expected old women to be anarchists. In fact, he had to admit he was surprised to find any women in the group at all.

The gray-bearded man shoved a glass in Vito's hand. "Beer," he said.

"I don't usually ..."

"Sit down." The man pulled Vito down onto the bench beside him. "Don't let Carlotta bug you, she's always nasty to strangers, but when you get to know her you'll find she's a real shit. How old are you?"

"Uh, sixteen."

"Good, so it's legal. Drink up."

Vito gave a smirk. "You care if it's legal?"

"Huh? Oh, good grief. We don't go around breaking laws right and left just because we're anarchists, you know."

"Only when we need to make a point," Carlotta said.

"Anyway, we don't want to get the Cockatoo in trouble with the cops. It's a good place, they let us meet here, we wouldn't want to screw that up. Cheers!"

Vito took a sip of the beer. It was bitter, and he choked. Sergio laughed and pushed the glass back up to his lips. "Never drank beer before?"

"Yeah ... sure," Vito gasped. "But this is pretty strong."

"It's good Serennian beer," the old man said. "Stronger than those lousy Belgian ales, miserable piss." He drained his glass, smacked his lips, and reached for the pitcher. "This stuff has real bite. Drink up, kid, beer makes politics go down easier."

Vito took another swallow.

"What's your name?"

Sergio answered for him. "Onesti."

"Vito Onesti," Vito said.

The older woman blew out a cloud of sour smoke. "Onesti, Onesti ..."

"His dad's the one running against Canale."

“As a Green,” Vito said proudly.

The anarchists burst out laughing.

Sergio put his arm around Vito’s shoulders. “It’s okay, kid. Don’t make fun, people! Everyone has to start somewhere.”

“True, true,” said the gray-beard. “And when was the last time we had anybody new at one of our gatherings?”

“Only when Sergio trawls in some cute kid,” someone said.

Vito’s eyes went wide.

Sergio withdrew his arm.

“Welcome, kid,” said the man with the beard. “Let me top that off.” He reached for the pitcher and spilled beer across the table. “Damn. Waiter! Where’s Giuseppe? Giussepp’, get us another pitcher! My name’s Pietro Giometti.” He grabbed Vito’s hand and shook it hard.

Vito gasped at the man’s grip. “My brother’s named Pietro, too.”

“Great! We’ll be brothers. I’ll be the elder.” He moaned. “Much, much, much the elder.”

Sergio ruffled Vito’s hair. Vito started and pulled back. “Little brother of the anarchists. Stick with us, we’ll get you arrested yet.” He raised his glass in salute. “Welcome, Vit’.”

Vito allowed himself a shy smile and raised his glass again.

At the next table, the young woman with her brown hair tied back smiled a secret smile, put a few bills on the table, and left the room. Outside she pulled a cellphone from her purse. “Sig. Delsano? Yes. You won’t believe this, I think you’ll be pleased.”

The next morning the family Onesti sat together to breakfast. Giuliana was clearing her place, her mother was enjoying a second cup of coffee, Vito yawned over a roll and a slice of ham. He looked green. Pietro toyed with his fork, dragging his ham here and there over the plate but eating nothing. “Vit’,” Giuliana said as she swabbed the table with a damp rag, “don’t you feel well? Piet’, why don’t you eat that ham instead of torturing it so? This is what happens when you boys come in late. Ugo, speak to them.”

Onesti was busy memorizing a speech to deliver at a rally that morning; after the rally he would travel to Lindoro, a village in the south of the province, where he would speak to the local association of dairy farmers, historically a Conservative bunch. “Hm? What? Giuli’, I must get this speech down.”

“Another speech, yes, very important I’m sure, while your two sons run the streets like savages till all hours, getting up to I don’t know what. Tell them you won’t allow such behavior.”

"I won't allow such behavior," Onesti said.

Vito snickered.

"None of that, sir," Giuliana ordered. "I'm very angry with you. Sixteen years old and coming home at two in the morning, stinking of beer!"

"I'm of age," Vito said with wounded dignity.

"Not according to me," Giuliana said.

"Don't let it happen again," Onesti muttered.

"It's legal."

"What law says a sixteen-year-old boy can stay out drinking till two in the morning?" Giuliana went on. "Show me that in all those books you're reading."

Vito hung his aching head.

"And you, Pietro, where were you last night?"

Pietro looked up at his mother. Suddenly his mouth dropped open, his face turned the color of crème de menthe, and he stumbled toward the bathroom.

"Pietro!" She turned to her husband. "What is going on in this family?"

Onesti did not look up. "He's probably hung over."

"Hung over!"

"Didn't you say he'd been out drinking?"

"It's Vito who was out drinking. I didn't smell anything on Pietro. Good God, have both my children become alcoholics?"

Vito tore off a piece of roll and shoved it in his mouth. "I only had two beers," he said around the bread.

"Giuli'," said Onesti, "a beer or two won't hurt the boy. I drank my first beer when I was fourteen."

"And look at you."

Onesti, seeing his wife's expression, said more seriously, "You're right, the boys shouldn't be out till all hours. Listen to your mother, Vit', you're too young yet for that kind of behavior."

Pietro returned to the dining room. He sipped at his coffee.

"Pietro, darling, are you ill?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Vito remarked.

Pietro glared at him. "I have to go out. I'll be late."

"Late for what?" Giuliana asked. "Where—?"

Pietro grabbed his jacket and left. When he came down the stairs, he found Sig. Galli at the concierge's desk. "Good morning, Sig. Galli."

"Is your father home?" Galli's voice was remarkably high this morning, almost in bass register.

"Yes, sir, he's upstairs. I'm sorry, I'm running late. Go on up." He went out to

the street.

Galli sped up the stairs. Pietro had not shut the apartment door firmly and it swung open at Galli's knock. Galli stepped inside and called out, "Onesti? Where are you?"

Ugo appeared in the hallway, napkin in hand. "Hello? Galli! Come in, come in. You're early, I wasn't expecting you yet. Have you had your breakfast? Come in and have a—"

Galli stopped the flow of pleasantries by throwing a newspaper at Onesti. "Have you seen that?"

Onesti dropped his napkin to catch the paper. "Seen what? The *Post*? I've been working on this speech."

"Read."

"What?"

Galli poked at the paper with one finger. "That."

Onesti squinted and read.

Candidate's Own Family Will Not Vote for Him

Ugo Onesti, Green Party candidate in the Caprio Province by-election, fighting a losing battle against popular Conservative candidate Dario Canale, labors under yet another private hindrance: his own mother-in-law has announced she will not vote for him. In an exclusive interview, Sig.ra Grazia Sette, mother-in-law of Ugo Onesti, confirmed she will cast her vote elsewhere. "He's running as a Green. I want to support him, but I can hardly turn my back on my principles. I must keep hold of my convictions." Sig. Onesti was not available for comment.

Onesti looked up at Galli.

Galli paced. "This is very interesting. Very interesting indeed. The *Post* is a Conservative Party mouthpiece, and that they should take the trouble to print this sort of thing ... They're worried, obviously worried."

Onesti said softly, "Did mother really say that?"

"Why should they be so worried? Well, they would only stoop to such tactics if they think we actually have a chance of winning."

"But did she really say such a thing?"

Onesti turned slowly and went back into the kitchen. Vito was dozing in his plate, Giuliana was stirring sugar into another cup of coffee, Sig.ra Sette was rinsing her cup at the sink. Giuliana looked up, smiled, then noticed her husband's expression and Sig. Galli approaching behind him. "Sig. Galli? Ugo,

you didn't say he'd be here so early. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Onesti said, with unaccustomed gravity, "That's not necessary. Mother, will you explain something to me?"

Sig.ra Sette turned from the sink, cup and towel in hand. "Hm? What's the matter, dear? You look as queasy as Vito. Was the ham bad? It tasted fine."

He opened the newspaper and raised it before him, clearly displaying the headline. "Is this true?"

She leaned forward to see, then dropped the cup, which fell to the floor and skittered under the table without breaking.

"Mama!" cried Giuliana.

Sig.ra Sette pushed back her hair. "I don't understand. Who wrote this?"

Giuliana took the paper out of Ugo's hand, read quickly, and whispered. "Oh, Mama."

Vito roused. He squinted at his mother and reached over to take the paper out of her limp hand.

"It doesn't matter who wrote it," Onesti said. "Did you say that to a reporter?"

Tears filled Sig.ra Sette's eyes. "Ugo, dearest, believe me—"

Ugo did not raise his voice. "Mother, I'm not angry, but I must know."

She swallowed. "Ugo, my son ... I've always considered you as my own child, you know ... I won't lie to you. I have thought that. Yes, it's true. I've been struggling with myself for days now, trying to decide what to do about all this. I love you so much, and I'd almost decided to throw away all my work with the Progressives and vote for you. You know what that would mean to me. I've never hid my political convictions from you. But I swear, dear, I never, never told a soul!"

"We might be able to use this," Galli muttered.

"But you did tell someone, Mother," Onesti said. "We've always had our political differences, I've never held that against you, I enjoy our friendly debates. But to say this to a reporter, and at such a time ..."

"Yes," Galli said to himself, "that might work."

Sig.ra Sette cried out, "But I never! Well, I've chatted with Lena, of course, at lunch sometimes, but she's no gossip and wouldn't tell anyone. I swear, I would never do anything to hurt you, Ugo, I ... oh!"

She sat down.

"I remember now. That young woman! I did mention something like this to her." She snatched the paper out of Vito's hands. "Yes, I said that, those exact words. Oh, you mean she was a reporter?"

"What woman?" Galli demanded.

Sig.ra Sette looked up with haunted eyes. "After lunch yesterday I met a girl

over by the river. She asked the way to the Café Ris. Naturally I showed her, I was coming home anyway, and she asked ... oh, I'm a fool, I'm such a fool!"

"What happened?"

"I was standing on the promenade, at the parapet. I was thinking about you, Ugo, about this whole mess, trying to decide what to do, and she came up and said the strangest thing."

"What did she say?" Galli pressed on.

She blushed. "She said I looked as if I were about to throw myself into the river."

"Mama!" Giuliana cried.

"She was so nice, so thoughtful ... I thought, not many young folks would bother about an old lady like me ..."

Vito whistled. "Very sneaky."

Galli nodded. "Clever. And of course you opened your heart to this nice young girl. Why not? A perfect stranger, you'd never see her again, it seemed as safe as a confessional. Very clever indeed."

Onesti hung his head. Sig.ra Sette reached out to him, then pulled her hand back and covered her mouth as a tear streaked her face.

Galli snapped his fingers several times. "Come, it's not the end of the world. We can make some use of this, I think. If we make an announcement ... hm ... yes, if we announce publicly that Sig.ra Sette won't be voting for you because she holds her principles as high as you hold yours ... hm ... yes, and of course, as a true Green, you have the highest respect for the political convictions of others, in a free country everyone has the duty to vote according to their principles. Especially your own family."

Vito whistled again. "Do you think it'll work?"

"We'll try it at this afternoon's rally."

Onesti sighed and finally spoke. "I've already memorized my speech."

"We'll keep it short, just a sentence or two, we won't make a fuss over it. No reason to, it's perfectly natural, perfectly in keeping with our principles. I'll come up with a few lines. Back in an hour." He hurried out of the apartment.

The family remained at table. Sig.ra Sette peeked up at Ugo. Giuliana would not look at her. Onesti looked at the floor. Even Vito, for a wonder, kept his mouth shut.

Pietro sat in the bakery. He tried to drink some coffee, but every sip made him want to vomit. Thoughts raced through his head, a mishmash of enthusiasm and panic. He wondered how all this wild sequence of events had been born.

He loved Elena. A perfectly innocent thing to do, fall in love with a pretty

girl. Men do it every day. But because he loved Elena, they'd had sex; because they'd had sex, Elena had become pregnant; because she was pregnant, her father had gotten angry; because he was angry, he'd attacked Papa; because he'd attacked Papa, Papa had been fired; because he was fired, he went into politics. And now Pietro was about to ... But having thought it through so logically thus far, his emotions took control again. This was the moment when he might have said to himself, Stop. Think. The simplest acts may have unintended consequences, disastrous consequences. Think before you act. But he could not think. Today was his wedding day.

Sig.ra Bassano came up to him. "Poor boy, you look so miserable. Are you having second thoughts?"

Pietro started. "No, no. I want to ... you know. She's late, isn't she? What time is it?"

"She's not late, it's not even ten." She glanced out the window and smiled. "In fact, she's early."

The bell tinkled as the door opened and Elena walked in. Pietro stood up and seized her hand. They kissed.

"Good morning, husband," Elena whispered.

"Good morning, my wife," he answered.

"Oh!" Sig.ra Bassano could scarcely restrain her tears.

Elena turned to her. "Good morning, Aunt."

Sig.ra Bassano put her finger before her mouth. "Don't joke, dear, not here. We haven't made it through this yet. If anyone were to find out ... it won't exactly be looked on favorably by the authorities. I'll run get ready, give me five minutes. Do you want anything? Are you hungry?"

Elena sat at the table. "No, thank you. I couldn't eat a thing."

"Pietro can't either," Sig.ra Bassano said and pointed at the table. "Look at that sweet roll, not a nibble." She went into the back room.

Elena stroked his hand. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said. He looked at Elena. She looked at him. They pressed their hands together more tightly. "Did you have any trouble getting out? Does your family suspect?"

"No, not a bit. It's kind of weird. Papa went out early, said he had a secret meeting. Everything's a secret these days. A limousine called for him. Mama wasn't paying any attention to me at all, so I just slipped out. That's why I'm early."

"Good."

"And you?"

"No problem. Vito, that brat, last night he found the newspapers I was hiding,

the ones that published our banns.”

“Oh, no!”

“Why do they have to be published for two full weeks? Anyway, I got them away from him before he started reading.”

“That was lucky.”

“He’s been reading so many stupid books lately, he doesn’t have time for the papers. But I’ve been hiding them for a week, and he finds them last night of all nights! I should have thrown them out, but I didn’t ... didn’t want them in the trash ...”

She smiled at his superstition. They looked at one another. He said, “You look wonderful.”

“You’re pale. Pietro, are you sure you want to do this?”

Panic scampered across his face. “Yes! Don’t you?”

She smiled. “I love you.”

He smiled. “I love you, too.”

Sig.ra Bassano reappeared in a coat and hat. “Well, time to start our adventure. Are you ready?”

Pietro swallowed and stumbled to his feet. Elena stood.

“You look absolutely ravishing, dear!” Sig.ra Bassano said. “I just know I’m going to cry.”

The three left the bakery. Outside, a young woman with brown hair and a cellphone, completely unremarkable and unremarked, walked quietly behind them.

They went by an indirect route to the Town Hall so no one would notice them. Just as they crossed the Old Marketplace a limousine hummed past them. Its passengers did not note the nervous, middle-aged woman and the two trembling teenagers; they were heatedly working up the speech Onesti would give in Lindoro.

“As a Green,” Onesti rehearsed, “I don’t demand that everyone think as I do or believe what I believe. As a Green, I respect everyone’s opinions, even if I don’t agree with them. My dear mother-in-law naturally ... naturally ...”

“... *is* naturally an independent, intelligent woman whose opinions are of the utmost importance to me,” Galli prompted.

“Whose opinions are important to me,” Onesti repeated. He sighed morosely. “I suppose that’s true. But you know, it does rather hurt.”

“Memorize,” Galli commanded.

The limousine rolled out of town southward through fields nearing harvest, past orchards heavy with fruit, into the foothills of the mountains. The village of Lindoro had a population of only 853, poor dairy farmers for the most part, and

staunch Conservatives all, despite what the Conservatives had done to them.

“And what have the Conservatives done for you?” Onesti gripped the lectern and looked down at what was likely half the population of Lindoro. “They’ve raised your taxes. They’ve placed restrictions on how you can and cannot raise your crops, house your cattle, and what prices you can get for your milk, cheese, and grain. They’ve betrayed every promise they’ve made to increase the subsidies necessary to make your crops profitable on the international market. In the last two months, right here in Lindoro, three farmers have lost their leaseholds to bankruptcy!”

Some in the audience nodded to one another.

“They’ve withheld funding that would give your children the education they deserve. Just last month, right here in Lindoro, part of the school actually collapsed because there hasn’t been enough money to make the necessary repairs. Teachers are holding classes in your town hall!”

Several in the audience shook their heads sadly.

“Shameful! Yes, the Conservatives always promise to protect you, to guard you against crime and terrorism. But to push through their expensive schemes, to enrich themselves and their cronies in big business, they do their best to fill you with fear. They torment you with all the terrible things that might happen if they’re not kept in power, all the scary people out there who want to hurt you. The Conservatives treat you like babies frightened of shadows. They think if they keep you frightened, you won’t notice their lies and broken promises. But you know better than that. You can see what’s what. I’ve never yet met a farmer who couldn’t smell the truth under his nose.”

More than a few in the audience grinned.

“Friends, I used to be a Conservative. I listened to their speeches, listened to all the old clichés, the tired mottoes, and I nodded. And when they said I should be afraid, afraid of foreigners, afraid of crime, afraid of poor people, afraid of people who practice strange religions or no religion at all, I nodded then, too. But one day it hit me: these politicians are afraid of just about everything!”

The audience laughed.

“How can anyone who’s scared to death protect you? How can anyone shaking in his boots guard you? Do you want cowards in charge of our national security? Do you want cowards telling you how to live your lives, how to raise your children, all the while making it harder and harder for you to make ends meet, to keep food on the table? Do you want to keep handing them a free ticket to do as they please, while your friends and neighbors are going bankrupt and your school is falling down on top of your children?”

Applause.

The limousine sped back to Borgo. Onesti patted his belly, good humor completely restored. “That didn’t go at all badly, eh, Galli? A good speech, a very good speech. Did you like my little improvisation? About the free ticket?”

“It went over well,” Galli rumbled.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we pick up a few votes there. Any votes gained in Lindoro would be a real triumph for us. Nice little town, rather run down. Lunch wasn’t bad. Is it true about the school? Did it really collapse? That’s terrible. Really terrible. Are we going to any other farm towns?”

As the limousine came into Borgo, Galli’s cellphone buzzed. He opened it and answered, “Galli here.”

Onesti pretended not to listen.

“What? No. I’ll find one.” Galli closed the phone. He leaned forward and said to the driver, “Find a kiosk.”

“Anything wrong?” Onesti asked.

Galli pointed to the right and said to the driver, “Over there.”

The limousine pulled up at a kiosk. The driver got out, took a paper, paid, handed the paper to Galli through the window, got back behind the wheel, and drove on. It was the evening edition of the *National Post*, and above a dark and blurry photograph obviously taken with a cellphone, the front-page headline was

Green Candidate’s Son Member Of Anarchist League

Onesti fainted.

Sig.ra Bertucci gasped as the door opened and the uniformed driver dragged Onesti up the stairs. Giuliana, hearing the driver kick at the front door, ran in, saw her husband unconscious in the arms of a unknown man, and staggered back.

“Ai! Is he dead? I knew all this would kill him! Ugo, my poor Ugo!”

The driver dropped Onesti on the sofa. Sig.ra Sette entered from the kitchen and threw up her hands. “What’s happened?”

Galli had entered, wearing an expression of the utmost disgust. He threw the newspaper at her. She stared down at it and screeched, “Oh!” then fell into a chair.

“Mama!” Giuliana, kneeling beside Onesti and fanning his face, jumped up to run to her mother.

“Look!” Sig.ra Sette wheezed.

“What?” Giuliana read. “Ah ... ah ... ai!”

She fell to the floor in a swoon.

Galli silently regarded the ruin of the family Onesti. Only the guilty child was

missing, and he soon made his entrance. Vito stuck his head out from his bedroom door holding in one hand a battered copy of Malatesta's *Anarchy*, finger keeping his place. He said, "Hey, what's all the noise?"

Galli crossed his arms and glared. "So. Are you proud of yourself? You've destroyed your family." He snatched the book out of Vito's hand. "Aha! The murder weapon!"

Vito twisted up his face. "What the hell?"

"See?" He displayed the cover triumphantly to the bewildered adults.

"Give me that!" Vito cried, with more fear than defiance.

The driver, still breathing a bit heavily, for carrying an Ugo Onesti up two long flights of stairs is no light work, picked up the paper where it had fallen from Giuliana's limp fingers and handed it to Galli. Galli opened it and thrust it into the boy's face.

Vito's eyes went wide. He made a burbling noise, guh guh guh.

"Yes," Galli roared, "guh guh guh, you little idiot! You've ruined your father. You've killed your mother. You've probably driven your grandmother insane. You've destroyed the Green Party. Behold the anarchy for which you yearned!"

Vito tripped backwards into his room and slammed shut the door.

Galli frowned, marched to the sofa, and slapped Onesti smartly across the face twice. Onesti grunted. His watery eyes blinked open. "Wake up, you! This is no time to nap. We have to figure out some way to save the situation."

Onesti moaned. "What ... what ... ?"

"It can't be a complete catastrophe," Galli said. "It can't. I won't let it be. There has to be some way ..."

Onesti opened his eyes. Consciousness returned, and with it, piercing memory. "Oh my God!"

"Oh my God indeed. Why didn't you tell me your hideous spawn was a damned anarchist?"

"Anarchist? My Vito could never—"

"Never? He's reading Malatesta! He went to an anarchist meeting on the very eve of the election! There's a picture of him carousing with them!"

"I can't believe—"

"How can I pull this out of the fire?" Galli muttered. "There must be a way."

Onesti said timidly, "Maybe if I said that as a Green I have respect for—"

"Ass! No one respects anarchists! We could say he was spying on them, that he was going to turn them in ..."

He looked around the room. "Where's your television?"

"Eh?"

"We have to find out if it's hit the television news yet. Where is it?"

“In the library. We don’t watch much television.” Onesti blundered to his feet and reeled down the hall to the library. Galli hurried in and switched on the set.

“Do you think that could work? Maybe he really was spying ...”

“Shut up.” Galli poked at the remote control. “Where’s the news? Ah.”

An announcer was saying, “... the price of oil has now risen to 94 euros per barrel. This increase promises political trouble for the leaders of France and Germany, whose approval ratings are already at historic lows. Locally, the by-election ...”

“Damn!” Galli said, “They’re already on it.”

“... new revelations. Immediately upon the shocking discovery that the son of Green Party candidate Ugo Onesti ...”

Onesti groaned.

“Ssh!”

“... member of an anarchist group, as reported by the *National Post* this afternoon ...”

Giuliana and Sig.ra Sette appeared in the doorway. “Ugo?” Giuliana groaned.

“Ssh!” Galli and Onesti hissed.

“... it has just been learned that Ugo Onesti’s eldest son was married today in the Borgo Town Hall to the daughter of the Roijnan criminal Karl Mitek, whose attack upon Onesti precipitated an international scandal. Authorities are now questioning whether that attack was in fact plotted between the two men in order to facilitate Onesti’s political career ...”

The earth stopped spinning. No one moved. The television announcer babbled on unheard. Ugo gaped at Galli. Galli gaped at the television. Giuliana and her mother clutched one another in the doorway.

After a long moment, Galli breathed again. “Well. And that is the end of that.”

13

THAT SAME MORNING — while the family Onesti had been quietly breakfasting, while Vito suffered the aftereffects of his first real beer, while Pietro suffered over his impending elopement, and while Galli was plotting to counteract the article regarding Sig.ra Sette's political convictions — Karl Mitek, Roijnan businessman, had entered a limousine to be taken to a most important meeting with the President of Serenno himself. He had said nothing of this to his wife and daughter. In any case, he still wasn't speaking to his daughter. If she had not succumbed to a roll in the hay with that damned Onesti pup, if she had not been so unprincipled as to become pregnant, if, if, if ... He certainly did not blame his own righteous anger for the fix he had wound up in. No man ever blames his own righteous anger for his troubles. That is what makes self-righteousness.

Now the President had summoned him, sent a limousine to drive him privately, incognito, to Fricchi. Very interesting. Most gratifying. The fools had obviously seen their mistake, they wanted to pacify him. They might even hand him the factory gratis! Well, that would only be fair. It was his by right, he had spent enough money, time, and effort to get it. He deserved a public apology. To accuse him of criminal behavior, to slander his name! On the television and in the papers! His righteous anger stirred again, he was tempted to tell the driver to stop, turn around, he would not go speak to those Serennian pigs, damn them all to the deepest pits of hell!

But he remembered the money expended on the aborted deal. Don't condemn without a fair hearing, he thought. Let them make their little speeches. These politicians, after all, they have their pride. A public apology might be beyond their limited capabilities. In fact, he could not recall ever hearing an apology pass a politician's lips. But as long as he got his factory, he thought magnanimously, he could afford to be generous. He would show them that Roijnans know how to conduct themselves. He would forgive them.

But could he trust those bastards? Ha! Although he had not told his wife the purpose of this trip, he had left an envelope and instructed her to open it if he was not back by midnight. It contained the invitation to this meeting and a note to contact his lawyer. This was deliciously like a spy movie, and he enjoyed the intrigue. He would enjoy even more his triumph over President Zanni, and most of all he would enjoy finally getting his hands on that factory. Why had they made such a fuss over a few incentives offered to the provincial finance director? That's how business functions. To be shocked was simple naiveté. Only fools

like these Serennians would carry on about it.

The limousine moved smoothly over the highway. Its upholstery was leather. There was dark glass at the windows. A telephone hung below the glass partition between him and the driver, and under that was what looked like a door. He examined it, found a button, pushed it. The little door swung open to reveal tiny bottles of water, beer, wine, even scotch whiskey, and glasses, as well as packages of nuts, cheese, some decent bread, and several pastries. Well! Whatever he thought about the Serennians, they knew how to treat themselves. He took a bottle of beer, a package of biscuits, and sat back to enjoy the three-hour ride. He would show this Zanni what was what, and what had better be. He would teach these folks how a man makes something of himself, with the munitions factory as the first lesson. When it was finally in his hands ... He was soon sound asleep.

He woke with a start as the limousine stopped. "Are we there?" But the limousine was at a traffic light. "Ah," he murmured, "looks like we're in Fricchi. There's the Central Bank, I remember that. Just a few more minutes. Where's my briefcase?"

The limousine did not stop in front of the Federal Palace but turned down a side street and went around the back where it would not be visible from the street. The driver climbed out and opened the rear door. Mitek stepped out. He scowled to find himself at a loading dock, with cans of refuse ranged beside it. The aroma was not rosy. But a narrow door on the dock opened and a large man with a small head appeared. "Sig. Mitek, please come in," he said.

Mitek climbed the stained metal steps and entered the Palace. "And you are?"

"I am Pucci. Good afternoon, Sig. Mitek."

"Pleased to meet you."

"And I you." The tone of his voice did not express unadulterated pleasure. "The President and the cabinet are waiting. Please come with me."

Mitek, after the long drive, would have liked to use a toilet first, but Pucci moved surprisingly fast and he had to puff to keep up through several winding hallways, up one staircase and down another, until Mitek wondered if they were still in the Palace or had somehow made their way back to Vijnul. "It's big enough, isn't it?" he said breathlessly.

Pucci smiled politely.

At last they passed through a paneled door into an imposing, exuberantly rococo room. A vast table stood in the center. Around it sat three men and two women. Standing at the far side was the widely televised figure of the Serennian President, Bobo Zanni.

The door whisked shut.

The President said, "Sig. Mitek, good afternoon and welcome. Please sit down."

Six faces regarded him coldly. His self-possession threatened to falter, but Mitek, son of Mitek, bourgeois to the seventh generation, was not easily nonplussed. He said, "Before we begin, it was rather a long drive and I'd like to freshen up."

The President said politely, "Oh, I'm sorry, I assumed that Sig. Pucci had already seen to your needs. I suppose you do not know the ministers. Allow me to introduce you. To your right is Sig.ra Eufemia Frusoni, Minister of State."

Mitek bowed to her, wondering about that toilet.

"Next is Dionisios Vaghi, Minister of Finance. Mauro Luca, Minister of Peace. And to my left, my secretary, Angelica Bosco, who will be assisting us today."

Mitek was feeling the effects of the beer he'd had during the ride. He would insist on using the toilet as soon as Zanni was through with these introductions.

"Then we have Umberto Fedoro, Minister of Secrets. Sig. Pucci you've already met. I apologize for the absence of my Vice President, Salo. He is in Washington, U.S.A., on a matter of grave importance. You are probably aware why I've asked you here."

Was the fellow never going to give him a chance to piss? He sighed and sat down in the empty chair. Pucci moved to stand behind him.

"Recent events involving you and your country have pained me deeply. I am appalled that misunderstandings have arisen between two such good friends, beautiful Roijna and our own beautiful Serenno. Of course you understand that it is my duty to protect Serenno against any violation of her laws."

Mitek narrowed his eyes and crossed his legs.

"The constant badgering of the press, the babble on the television news programs, all this has hopelessly confused matters and made it difficult to get to the simple facts, so that one is likely to have made mistakes and acted hastily."

Mitek smiled and nodded. Finally, the apology.

"But quiet, reasonable, rational discussion will allow us to acknowledge those mistakes and work to repair them."

Mitek relaxed and cracked his knuckles. Sig.ra Frusoni winced.

"Would you like some coffee?"

Mitek frowned. "What? Oh, no, no, thank you. But I would like to—"

"As you wish. Now, to business."

Good lord, Mitek thought, crossing his legs against the growing pressure in his bladder. Get on with the apology so we can start talking money. But I won't forgive them too quickly. Let them stew a while. Not a long while, just long

enough to have some fun and get the right down.

“We assume that you have expended a fair amount in your efforts to acquire our national munitions factory.”

“You’re right,” Mitek said. “These things don’t come cheap, you know. But it’s a private business, not a—”

“And we also assume that you would not like to lose that considerable investment.”

“Right again.”

Zanni offered an oddly patronizing smile. “Good. We’re in agreement. Sig. Mitek, my ministers have advised, and I have gladly concurred, that it would be wrong to see your efforts go to waste. And as it would be beneficial to our nation to ensure the continued operations of the aforesaid national munitions factory, we are happy to inform you that, as far as the government is concerned, there will be no further obstacles to your acquiring it.”

Mitek smiled. He opened his smile to say something appropriately grand and empty.

Pucci placed before Mitek a paper and pen.

Zanni said, “After we have your signature on this confession, we are prepared to allow the acquisition to proceed.”

Mitek, reaching for what he thought was an agreement, stopped with his hand in the air. “Pardon me?”

“We are prepared to allow the acquisition to proceed.”

“No, what you said before that. Confession? What do you mean?”

The President’s smile remained resolutely in place. “Yes, after you have signed the confession.”

“Confession of what? What kind of confession?”

“Why,” Zanni said innocently, “a confession of the crimes you have committed, of course.”

Mitek’s eyes went small. “Crimes? What crimes?”

Zanni regarded Mitek with a rueful smile. “Oh, Sig. Mitek, please spare us these vain protests. We are all adults here, no playacting is needed.”

“I ask again, what crimes?”

Zanni sighed. “If you insist... First, the manipulation of certain clients of the munitions factory in order to embarrass Sig. Dante financially. Second, the subversion of a functionary of the state by pecuniary means to receive certain tax abatements. Third—”

“You son of a bitch!” Mitek shouted. The cry reverberated through the chamber. Angelica looked up with a gasp. “You brought me all the way here to accuse me of the same crap they’ve already cleared me of?”

“Sig. Mitek,” the President said, “I ask you to mind your language. There are ladies present. In our country, a gentleman does not speak so before women.”

Sig.ra Frusoni coughed.

“I had hoped this transaction would proceed without unpleasantness, but you obviously see fit to persist in your childish denials. Very well. I will speak plainly: We have proof that you bribed not only clients of the factory to cancel orders and make baseless complaints, but even suborned the company’s independent accountants to falsify records and precipitate the bankruptcy of Sig. Dante. We are prepared to press these charges—”

“I’m not confessing anything! I deny everything!”

“—*to press these charges*, Sig. Mitek,” the President roared, “in *our* courts according to *our own* legal process. Do you understand?”

Mitek glared.

Zanni made a show of suppressing emotion. “However, if you sign the confession placed before you, we will forgo legal remedies and allow the acquisition of the factory to proceed.”

Mitek stared at the faces confronting him. “I sign this, and you won’t try to take me to court?”

“Precisely. Simply sign the paper confessing that you bribed Ugo Onesti for tax abatements—”

“*What!*”

Mitek quickly scanned the page before him. He gabbled wordlessly for a moment, then swallowed and looked at Zanni with astonishment. “So that’s the game you’re playing.”

There came a quite audible *pop* as the President’s jaw clenched. The ministers sat as still as the marble beneath their feet. Pucci moved very close to the back of Mitek’s chair.

Mitek was a self-righteous man. Self-righteousness is the most dangerous of sins, for it is the most easily admitted into one’s heart, it is the most gratifying, and it makes all other sins possible. The self-righteous man can commit any horrendous act with a clear conscience, secure in the conviction that he is absolutely right, that everyone else is absolutely wrong, and that God Himself approves. Self-righteousness always leads to vengeance, and therefore Mitek was a vindictive man. Punishing someone he felt had done him a wrong was not merely a pleasure for him: it was a duty.

In other circumstances, implicating Ugo Onesti might have been undertaken with glee. But because he was a proud, self-righteous man, Mitek could not willingly take orders from anyone. Like any mule, when pushed, he locked his knees and refused to budge.

Mitek slowly, carefully, sneeringly ripped the confession into tiny pieces and tossed them into the middle of the table.

The marble faces of the ministers turned to the President.

Zanni struck the table with both fists. "You defy me?" he screamed.

Mitek crossed his arms on his breast and raised his chin high. "I confess nothing. I did nothing wrong. I bribed no one, and I sure as hell didn't bribe Onesti. His son's the cradle-robbing bugger, but Onesti's a decent fellow, God damn him. I won't play your political games. I'm a businessman."

Zanni's voice moved dangerously lower. "Mitek, presidents don't play games.

Luca whispered to Vaghi, "What now?"

The President whipped his basilisk stare at Luca, who shrank down in his seat.

"All right, Sig. Businessman," Zanni hissed. "You understand that without that confession you will never get your hands on the factory? Your whole investment will be lost?"

"I've already written it off in my books. I'll survive."

"You're wrong if you think you have a choice. You *will* sign."

Pucci placed another sheet of paper before Mitek. It was a copy of the confession.

Mitek snapped, "I'm not one of your spineless lackeys, Sig. President. I will not sign."

"*Don't you dare defy me!*" The echoes came back from around the room, *dare* defy, *dare* defy, *dare* defy.

Mitek stood. "I've evidently overstayed my welcome. Sig. President, Ministers — good day."

He turned toward the door but found Pucci blocking his way.

Zanni sat down, dreadfully calm. "Sig. Mitek, no one is going anywhere until you sign that confession."

The ministers' eyes widened.

Mitek spun round. "Let me out of this room."

Zanni folded his hands together.

"You can't keep me here!"

Zanni did not move.

"I'm a Roijnan citizen!"

Zanni's lips twisted into a cold smile.

"Are you out of your mind?" Mitek shouted. "You can't hold me!"

Pucci put one trembling hand on Mitek's shoulder. "Please sit down, sir."

Mitek looked around wildly.

Vaghi said, "Zanni, really, do you think it wise to—"

A fierce glance shut him up.

"Please sit down, sir," Pucci said again.

Mitek stared at the ministers. Pucci pressed upon his shoulder. Slowly, Mitek sat.

"Now," Zanni commanded, "your signature."

"I want my embassy."

"They can't help you. Sign."

Mitek shook his head. "Never. I will never sign this damned pack of lies!"

Zanni waited. No one spoke. Silence filled the chamber like a poisonous cloud.

Angelica was trembling so violently that she could not hold her pad and pencil. She set them down on the table before her with great care. Her breath came short, sharp, shallow. The table rippled before her eyes. With one hand she pushed the hair from her brow, wondering if she would faint. She pushed her hands under her thighs to keep them still.

"You're crazy!" Mitek yelled. "You can't keep me here! I'll have you arrested!"

Zanni waited.

Mitek squealed like a mouse in a cat's paws, a sound he was not accustomed to hear from his own throat. He looked at the table, the faces of the ministers, the walls. He noticed there were no windows: what he had thought were windows, there in the shadows between the columns, were mirrors. No windows. He began to find it hard to breathe.

He said softly, "I need to use the toilet."

Zanni waited.

Pucci shifted on his aching feet. It was going to be a long day.

MME FELICA MITEK stirred in her sleep and moaned softly, “Karl?” Then she woke fully. She had nodded off on the couch again. This was becoming a bad habit, but the book had been dull, a typical thriller with an amoral but seductive spy and the virtuous, patriotic woman who loved him, and war was threatened, and would the beautiful but virtuous woman discover his secret in time? And so on, just like every other novel of its kind, until Felica had dozed off. But now it was dark beyond the windows, and she did not know the time. “Elena?” she called. “Karl?”

She went into the kitchen and looked at the clock. Past midnight! She felt a rising tickle of panic. She scurried through the house, calling out, “Karl? Elena? Karl!” A servant appeared in a nightdress, obviously just roused, curlers in her hair, moisturizer on her face. “Madame?” she asked through a yawn. “Is anything wrong?”

Mme Mitek stopped in front of the servant, eyes wild. “Where is Karl? Where is my daughter? Where is everyone? No one’s here!” She hurried away.

The servant stared after her. Then she shrugged and went back to bed.

The empty rooms mocked Mme Mitek. She had not been alone, truly alone, for over ten years. The servants were about, of course, they were always about somewhere, but they didn’t count. Karl and Elena counted, and she had not been separated from them both at the same time in ages. The last time had been when Elena was eight years old. Karl was away at a conference, Elena had been taken to her grandparents, a real treat for a child, to visit her grandparents without mama and papa, and that night Felica had slept wonderfully, luxuriating in the unaccustomed privacy.

But now she didn’t know where Karl and Elena were, Elena was not away visiting, the grandparents were long dead and her daughter should be safe at home. Especially in her condition. And Karl ...

She remembered the envelope he had left with her. “Only open it if I’m not home by midnight.” She had found this funny, like one of her empty-headed thrillers. “Oh, Karl,” she had said, “why are you carrying on like James Bond? Just tell me where you’re going.”

“Do as I tell you.” The man loved his little mysteries. There had been too many of those lately.

She returned to the study and searched the table, the sofa, the cushions, but could not find the envelope. She went into the kitchen, searched the table, the

cabinets, even the refrigerator and oven. Nothing. Annoyance began to transform into new panic, but she suppressed it. Where had she put the envelope? Think! She searched the foyer, the bedroom, the closets, the staircase, the toilet. Nowhere to be found. It was now almost one o'clock. She found herself shaking with worry. Where was Karl? Where was the envelope? The universe was conspiring to drive her mad.

She went back into the study and sank down on the couch, sitting painfully on the novel she had been reading. She heaved up, pulled the book out from under her, almost tossed it across the room, and then saw stuck between its pages something white. The envelope! She had used it as a bookmark. If it had been a snake ...

She tore open the envelope and drew out a note and letter. The note, in Karl's handwriting, read, "Felica, if you read this I've obviously not come home before midnight. Or you've gotten curious and opened this despite my instructions damn it." Oh, that man! Assuming she'd be nosy, when she had actually almost forgotten his stupid envelope. "But if it is after midnight and I'm not home call Eckmann immediately. Give him the letter here. Tell him to call Vlaamstad. They'll know what to do. Karl."

More mystery! she thought. If he ever gets back from wherever he's gone, I'll never read another thriller as long as I live.

The enclosed letter was on heavy paper ornamented with the seal of the Serennian government. She could not speak Serennian, but she picked out a few words, "president" and "conference." Panic welled again within her.

She must telephone the lawyer, Eckmann. It was very late, it would be considered rude, but Karl had commanded that she telephone and so she must. For the most part, Felica Mitek ceded to her husband's demands — with such a man, it was easier to simply obey. And truly, she seldom wished to defy him. When they had first met, they had both realized, unconsciously, that each had found the perfect complement in the other: the one who ordered and the one who wished to be told what to do. Mme Mitek never demanded, rarely pleaded, and seldom considered that her husband might err. She trusted that he would always act fairly, decently, morally, wisely, and if he blustered and puffed sometimes, well, every man has his faults. This attitude of hers had made their marriage, especially during the last few weeks, much easier.

She took up the phone and called the lawyer Kranz Eckmann. The phone rang several times before a hoarse voice growled, "Hmeh?"

"Kranz," Mme Mitek said with quavering voice, "I'm sorry to wake you so late, I really am, but something terrible has happened."

"Felica?" He coughed to clear his throat. "What time is it?"

"It's after one, I'm really so sorry."

"Oh. Don't apologize, Felica, I was expecting you to call."

She breathed with relief. "Oh, thank goodness! So Karl told you—"

"Karl? No, I saw it on television."

Terror seized her. "On television! My God, what's happened? Is he dead? Was there an accident?"

"Eh? What? What's this about Karl? Where is he?"

Near hysteria, she gabbled, "But that's why I called! I don't know where he is! What did you see on television?"

"Well," he stammered, "about the wedding, of course."

"Wedding? What wedding? I'm calling about Karl."

"Elena's wedding, what else?"

Mme Mitek's mind went blank as a clean sheet of paper.

"Felica? Felica, are you there?"

She made a strangled sound.

"Felica?"

"Wedding!" she screeched. "Elena's not getting married. What do mean by wedding?"

"You honestly don't know? It's all over the news, how could you not know?"

Mme Mitek slowly slid off the couch onto the floor. Her breath came harsh and ragged, she could not feel her hands and feet. "I ... I haven't had the television on all night. I was reading, I fell asleep. What are you talking about?"

"Hm." The lawyer coughed. "I thought you would have ... Well, what's done is done. Have you heard from Elena?"

"She's not here! I haven't seen her since just after breakfast, and now you tell me she's married! Oh, Kranz, where is she?"

"Probably still in Borgo with her new husband. Don't worry."

"Husband? What husband? Who's stolen my baby?"

"Good grief, Felica, who do you think? That's why it was on the news. They're falling all over themselves reporting it because she finally married that Pietro Onesti. Did you think she'd go marry someone else after he got her pregnant?"

"Yai!"

"Felica? Felica, are you there? Felica!"

But Mme Mitek lay unconscious on the floor, head cocked awkwardly against the couch, the telephone nested between her breasts.

When she came to, the faces of the maidservant and Kranz Eckmann swam above her. "Oh," she groaned, "something's poking me."

"Mme Mitek," the servant clucked. She pulled the telephone out of Sig.ra

Mitek's blouse, and she and the lawyer lifted her to the couch. The servant fetched a glass of whiskey while Eckmann rubbed Felica's wrists. After a sip, Mme Mitek demanded frantically, "Kranz, what are you doing here? I was just talking to you on the phone."

"You fainted," he explained.

"Did I? Fainted? I've never fainted in my life. Oh!" She remembered the telephone conversation. "Elena!"

"She's not here, yes, I know," Eckmann said. "Now, don't faint again."

"I won't, I won't. My poor baby!" She began to sob.

"I don't understand how you didn't know about this."

The servant wrung her hands. "Madame, we saw it on the news, but we didn't dare say anything. We thought you knew."

"How could she get married?" Felica groaned. "Where would they do it? She's just a child! She's not old enough to marry without our consent, and we certainly didn't give it. My poor, poor baby!" The servant offered another sip of whiskey, but Mme Mitek pushed it away. "No, I don't like whiskey, give me schnapps."

The lawyer got to his feet with a series of cracks and pops and began to pace. "As I understand it, a Serennian woman brought over her sister who lives in Roijna to sign the license, saying she was Elena's aunt, and the slipshod Serennian authorities didn't bother to confirm."

"Oh, this is awful, awful. Karl will kill her. He'll kill me! He'll have a stroke. Karl!" she shrieked, suddenly remembering.

"And where's Karl?" Eckmann asked.

"That's why I called you!" she gabbled. "He hasn't come back!"

"Come back? From where?"

"He went out this morning early, a limousine called for him, and before he went he left a note." She flapped desperately for the note and letter, found them stuck between the cushions of the couch. The lawyer quickly read them, thought a moment, then reached for the telephone, still warm from its sojourn on Mme Mitek's breast. While he dialed and waited, Felica clutched at his sleeve. "Where is Karl? What's happened to him? What does that letter say?"

"Calm down, Felica. Probably nothing has happened. But I wonder ..." He said into the phone, "Yes, Eckmann here. There may be a new development in the Mitek affair. Yes. No, not the wedding, I'm not calling about that, it's about Mitek, Mitek himself. He's disappeared. Yes. He evidently received an invitation from Zanni for a meeting, a car called for him. He left a note, obviously suspected trouble. Well, you know Mitek, pig-headed ..."

As Eckmann spoke, Mme Mitek clutched at a pillow, at her dress, her hair,

her breast where the mark of the telephone still glowed red. In less than an hour her entire world had crumbled. While she slept! She would never sleep again, she knew she would never be able to close her eyes again.

The lawyer said, "Yes, I'll be there in an hour," and hung up the phone. He turned back to Felica. "I have to go."

"No, don't leave!"

"Calm down. Something certainly has happened, we don't know what, but panic will not improve the situation. That was Vlaamstad I was talking to, the ambassador to Serenno. There's been some talk about the munitions factory ..."

"That factory, that damned factory," she moaned. "Our lives have been ruined by that factory."

"Please be quiet." He put on his coat. "We must be calm, too much depends on what we do next. Zanni invited him ... if he went across the border willingly ..."

Ice sent sharp crystals through her heart. "What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything. But Vlaamstad has evidently been expecting Zanni to try ... Look, something fearful may have happened."

"Karl!"

"Be strong, Felica," he said awkwardly. "We don't know anything for sure yet. Maybe it's not so bad, maybe there's just been an accident—"

"Yai!"

"I mean, maybe they've had a flat, or the battery died—"

"Yai ai!"

"Felica, please! Good God, it may be nothing, it should be nothing, Zanni would be crazy to ... Karl will probably walk through the door any minute. If he does, call me at Vlaamstad's. Here's the number." He scribbled it down on the cover of the book and stuffed the envelope into his coat pocket. "I've got to go now. I'll call you if I learn anything. Goodbye." And he left.

Mme Mitek remained on the couch, tears streaming down her face. The servant stood in the corner, watching with wide, excited eyes.

Mitek wearily slumped at the big table in the cabinet chamber. He was so tired that even his bladder had stopped aching.

Only Pucci, Angelica, and President Zanni remained in the chamber with him; the other cabinet members had gone, one after the other. The first to go was Eufemia Frusoni, who, at four in the afternoon, stood and announced, "I'm going."

"Sit down," Zanni commanded.

"I will not sit down," she answered calmly. "I will not be a party to this

foolishness, not a minute longer.”

“Sit down!” Zanni shouted.

“You are insane, Bobo, utterly insane. You cannot seize a foreign national and hold him prisoner. Certainly not in the Federal Palace.” And she marched to the door.

“If you set foot out of this room before I allow it,” Zanni hollered, “you will no longer be a member of this cabinet!”

“Unlock this door,” she commanded Pucci.

“Pucci!” shouted the President.

Pucci paused a moment. He looked at the President. He looked at Sig.ra Frusoni. Then he rose, went to the door, inserted the key in the lock.

“Pucci, damn it!”

He turned the key.

Eufemia nodded to him. He opened the door, and she stepped outside.

“Frusoni!” he called. “Get back here! I’ll destroy you, Frusoni! You’ll never work in Serenno again! I’ll ruin you! Frusoni!”

Pucci closed the door behind her. He turned the key, pulled it out and dropped it in his pocket.

Luca left an hour later. The same threats echoed in the chamber. The door was unlocked, opened, closed and locked again.

Two hours later both Vaghi and Fedoro stood up together and went to the door. Zanni screamed, “Vaghi! Don’t you dare leave, you damned dog! Sit down immediately! Now, you hear me? *Now!*” Spit flew from his lips, speckling the tabletop.

Vaghi did not answer. Fedoro, exhausted, shrugged and said, “I’m too old for this kind of thing,” and they left.

Pucci locked the door. He left the key in the lock.

Now only Pucci, Zanni, Angelica, and of course Mitek were left. No word had been spoken for hours. The four sat, looking at the table, the floor, but never at one another. Mitek dozed, woke himself snoring, dozed again. It was almost one o’clock in the morning.

Suddenly Angelica sobbed and threw herself down on the table. “I can’t bear it anymore, I can’t, I can’t!” she wept. “Stop it! Stop it, stop doing this! God, let us go, let us out of here, please, please, please!” She collapsed, gulping and choking.

Zanni, stunned, gently touched her back. “Angel?”

She flinched back and fell to the floor, staring wildly up at him. “Don’t touch me! Monster! Monster! How can you do this? You’re the President, not a gangster! But no, you are, you’re a criminal! *Criminal! Criminal!*” She began to

wheeze, unable to catch her breath for sobbing.

Zanni stared at her. His skin went gray, his eyes went small and red, his jaw hung slack. He felt as if all the air had been sucked from the room. He wanted to tear his collar open. He looked to Pucci, who did not look up.

Then he looked at Mitek. The sight of the Roijnan, hair rumpled, suit wrinkled, eyes bloodshot and unfocused, infuriated him.

“Get her out of here!” he yelled. “Now! Traitor!”

Pucci hurried around the table, took Angelica by the arm, dragged her to her feet, and hauled her to the door. He unlocked the door and pushed her out. Her screams filled the hall. Pucci shut the door, but she could still be heard.

Zanni muttered incoherently. “Traitors, I’m surrounded by traitors. But I won’t give in. No, I won’t! I’m the President, damn it, do you understand? *The President!*”

Pucci watched him as he hurtled about the room.

“Damned unpatriotic rebels! Communists! Mitek!” Zanni whirled on the prisoner. “You stinking shit from a diseased whore, sign that confession!”

Mitek said softly. “No.”

Zanni’s face became black. Raging flames lit his eyes. He said to Pucci, “You! Stay here till he signs, understand?”

Pucci nodded.

“Don’t go until he signs!”

Pucci nodded.

Zanni took a deep breath, nodded sharply, straightened his necktie, smoothed his hair, walked with all the poise he could muster to the door, and went out.

Mitek and Pucci looked at one another.

After a long while Pucci stood and wandered around the table. He stopped in front of one of the mirrors. For a time he looked at his reflection.

Mitek put his elbows on the table and rested his pounding head in his hands.

Pucci sighed. He turned, came back to his seat next to the Roijnan, and sat down. Quietly, as if he spoke only to himself, he said, “It’s late. I’m going to go to sleep. You understand? I’m going to go to sleep. I’m a sound sleeper. If a gun went off next to me, I’d probably sleep right through it. I wonder if the President remembered to lock the door when he went out. I’m too tired to check. I’m going to sleep now.” He put his head down on his arms and closed his eyes deliberately.

Mitek watched.

A minute later Pucci began to snore convincingly.

Then, through his haze of fatigue and despair, Mitek understood. He stumbled to his feet and grabbed the doorknob. Pucci did not move. Mitek eased the door

open and crept into the corridor. No one there. Silence. He looked back at Pucci. Pucci did not move.

Mitek ran. The door whisked shut.

A sigh escaped the sleeping advisor.

With the best spy maneuvers he'd seen in the movies, Mitek crept through the Federal Palace. At every corner he stopped, peeked around, hurried on. He scuttled from shadow to shadow. The corridors were empty. The offices were empty. Only once did he hear a sound; he quickly ducked into tiny room, but no one appeared. The tiny room turned out to be a toilet, and despite the urgency of the situation, the long hours of his captivity would not be denied and he used the facilities. With renewed courage he moved on.

He found a door to the outside at last and cautiously slid through. It was now almost two o'clock in the morning, the streets of Fricchi were quiet, only a few automobiles now and then zoomed by. Mitek had visited Fricchi only twice in his life, he wasn't sure where to run. North, south, east? He wanted to get home, but he could not run the entire way to Vijnul. He wondered hectically where the Roijnan embassy was.

A police car came down the street. Mitek hid behind a kiosk.

At two o'clock in the morning Anna Fadena left the office of *The People's Voice*. She yawned with gusto, since no one was around to see, and went to her car, an ancient Trabant. The seats of the car were buried under clothes, notebooks, files, shoes. The rear view mirror hung precariously from the windshield. But the headlights worked, and after several fruitless attempts the motor growled and clicked, a cloud of smoke exploded from the exhaust, and she was in motion.

As she turned onto via Baldini she caught sight of a man running along the sidewalk in a very strange manner. He hopped, slid, hopped, slid, yet he was covering a lot of ground. Curious, she slowed down and noticed that he had lost one shoe. A nut, she thought, but her reporter's instinct took over. Maybe he had been mugged, or maybe he was the mugger, running from the police. He passed beneath a streetlight and his face became visible.

Anna hit the brakes. The old Trabant shrieked. She rolled down her window and called out, "Sig. Mitek!"

Mitek yelped and darted into a dark doorway at the sound of a voice. His every bone and joint ached, his muscles were cramping, each breath was a stabbing dagger in his breast. He was no young fellow anymore, this mad dash through the streets of Fricchi was killing him, and losing his shoe had not helped. Had they caught him again? He squinted to see. "Oh!" he wheezed, "I ...

I know... I know you!”

“Yes, it’s Anna Fadena, *The People’s Voice*, I interviewed you a few weeks ago. But whatever’s going on? Why are you running? Have you been mugged? Where’s your other shoe?”

He lunged at the car and banged on the door. “Hel ... hel ... help me! Lady! Help me!”

Anna said, “What is it? Of course I’ll—”

“Get me out of here! Hurry! Before they catch me again!”

She leaned over and pushed open the passenger door, grabbed the flotsam of her life from the passenger seat and tossed it into the back. She peered warily into the shadows while he clambered in. As he pulled the door shut, she shifted into first and roared away.

“Now tell me what’s going on.”

Mitek shrank below the window so he could not be seen from the sidewalk. “Hurry! Oh God, hurry!”

Anna fought back the contagion of his panic. “Sig. Mitek, tell me what’s happened.”

“Go go go!”

“But where are we going? Tell me what’s happened so I’ll know what to do! Why are you in Fricchi? I wouldn’t think you’d risk coming here.”

He laughed hysterically. “I’ll never risk anything ever again. Your damned country! Your damned President!”

“President? What about the President? You mean Zanni?”

“Yes, that lunatic, that walking plague! Even his own workers call him a monster. Oh, get me out of here! Hurry! Take me to the embassy!”

She forced her voice into soothing tones. “Now, calm down. You’re safe. I’ll get you to your embassy, don’t worry. Take a deep breath and tell me just what’s happened.”

“Your goddamn President kidnapped me, that’s what’s happened!”

Again Anna hit the brakes. The poor old Trabant shuddered to a halt. She turned to Mitek and said, “Repeat that, please.”

“He kidnapped me! He tried ... tried to force me to confess that I bribed Onesti. I didn’t bribe Onesti! I didn’t!”

Anna thought quickly. She shifted into reverse, the car squealed backwards, she spun the wheel, shifted again, and raced back the way they had come.

“Where are we going?” Mitek asked, clutching the strap.

“To your embassy,” Anna said through clenched teeth. “But first we’re going to my office.”

“Office?”

The streetlights flashed faster and faster over her grinning face. “Poor Fazi. He’ll have to redo the whole first page.”

THE ONESTIS — most of them — were gathered in the kitchen. Giuliana sat at the table, eyes and nose red. Ugo also sat at the table, head in hands. Sig.ra Sette stood at the sink pretending to wash a plate, but actually running the water just to drown out Vito, who stalked back and forth emptying his lungs in reproaches and declamations.

“It’s a plot of the imperialist radical right who’ve taken over our republic. I knew they’d attack, Pa. They watched us, all of us, each and every one of us, followed us all around to find anything they could use against us.”

“Where’s Pietro?” Giuliana lamented. “Where’s my boy? Why has he run away? Why didn’t he talk to us? Oh, my boy, my poor boy.”

“What I don’t understand is how it wound up on the news before we found out, his own family,” Onesti said. “How could they know before his own father?”

“They own the media, they have all the power, everybody’s under their thumb, they get the whole population to spy on each other,” Vito went on.

Giuliana said, “I don’t care about your media or your goddamn politics! I just want to know where my Piet’ is. Is he safe? Is he eating? Does he have any money?”

“You don’t understand,” Vito chattered on, “you refuse to understand, typical bourgeois reaction, never recognize the real culprits, just moan and pray, pray and moan, that’s why they get away with it, that’s how they escape justice. Just follow the chain of events, it’s clear—”

Onesti jumped up. “We don’t want any of your lectures, you! This all started with your stupid anarchists!”

Vito said, all innocence, “No, Pa, it started with Grandmama saying she wouldn’t vote for you, remember?”

“Oh!” Sig.ra Sette dropped the plate she had been washing for so long, the cleanest plate in the world. It clattered against the porcelain. She threw her apron over her face and ran out of the room.

“Vito,” Giuliana snapped, “what are you doing? Don’t you have any feeling? You’re destroying your family!”

Now Vito began to cry. “I didn’t mean to!”

She grabbed him, pulled him close, hugged him and caressed his long hair. “My little boy, sshe. Poor baby ... Baby! Where’s my baby?” She sobbed as Vito wept into her breast.

Onesti threw his hands over his head. "What a family! Every one of you crazy, every one of you doing exactly the right thing to ruin me! Pietro gets his girlfriend pregnant, and who's his girlfriend? Daughter of a maniac, and not just any maniac, but a rich, foreign maniac. It's not enough to shame us all, oh no, he has to start a war! And you," he stabbed an accusing finger at Vito, "you join in with terrorists—"

"They're not terrorists!" Vito protested. "They're anarchists. They don't do anything, they just talk."

"Even my mother-in-law turns on me. Only my wife has stood by me, and probably only because she hasn't had a chance to ruin me yet!"

Giuliana bawled.

"But she's determined to make me deaf! All right. All right. You've all done for me. You win. If everyone's crazy, I might as well go crazy, too. You hear? I'm making a proclamation. As of now, Ugo Onesti is officially out of his mind. I, Ugo Onesti, declare myself a raving lunatic. I'll strip off my suit, put on my orange bathrobe and dance with the Hare Krishnas. No, no I won't, I'll just go naked into the streets, my big fat belly bouncing back and forth while I sing rock-and-roll and dance the ugga-bugga! I'll grow a beard long enough to cover my privates and wash my face in puddles and shampoo with a brick the little hair I haven't torn out. And everyone will point at me and say, 'There goes Onesti, he used to be a simple tax commissioner, but his family drove him nuts.'" He fell into a chair.

They stared at him. Then Giuliana stood.

"Where are you going?" Onesti grumbled.

"Into the library. I want to watch the news. Maybe they'll say something about Pietro. At least *they* seem to be able to keep track of our children!" She rushed out.

"Television!" Onesti shouted after her. "I'll never watch television again! It's ruined us all. How did they know before I did? How? And you!"

Vito, creeping out of the kitchen, jumped.

"Where do you think you're going? Back to your terrorist buddies? How could you hang out with such villains? Vito, Vito!" he moaned, "don't heap more shame on your poor papa's head. Please! I can't take any more. I don't have the strength, I just don't. The whole world's against us. Oh God, oh God ..."

Vito looked aghast at his father. He stepped toward him, one hand raised to touch. But Onesti sat so lost in self pity that Vito couldn't bring himself to interfere. He swallowed and left the room.

The electric burble of the television came from the library. Vito shuddered. He pulled on a jacket and cap and went out.

Vito had no intention of visiting the *Black Flag* bunch again. Yes, it had been fun to be with adults, to be spoken to as a rational being and not as a child, to trade jokes and to drink real beer for the first time. Gisela, the white-skinned, black-haired young woman who never smiled, was intriguing as a character study, and Sergio ... well, he didn't precisely understand what he thought of Sergio. But in fact, he hadn't found the group as a whole very appealing. Their political theorizing was intricate and pointless, when they weren't angry they were maudlin, and all their grand passion resulted in nothing more substantial than another round of drinks.

Coming out of the house, he carefully checked right and left. No one was visible. He scuffed along the street, head down, eyes to the pavement, in the natural but baseless supposition that if he could see no one, no one would see him. Once out of the neighborhood, he breathed more easily: Borgo was a town, little more than a village, but big enough that no one knew everyone. He checked frequently that no reporters were following.

He wandered, relieved to be away from home, relieved to be hearing anything other than weeping and moaning and the damned television. The sun was not shining, the sky was quilted with clouds, but the breeze blew fresh and the few people he passed were blessedly not discussing politics.

Unintentionally, he found himself in front of the library. A good place to enjoy a little peace and quiet and anonymity. He went in and walked, as usual, directly to the reading room and the racks of newspapers, then pulled up short. No newspapers today. Today he would have a holiday from politics and news. He went instead among the shelves to find a good book, a comic novel or an adventure story, something with heroes and monsters and jungles and lost tribes. That would be the perfect way to pass this terrible day.

He scanned the titles, pulled out a few, looked at the covers, the pictures of lions and panthers, rockets and spacesuits. He turned a corner.

There sat Sergio in a window. "H0.25 "ey, Vit'," he said. "How'd you make out after all that beer?"

Despite his first surprise, Vito smiled to himself. So that's why he had wandered here. "I was kind of hung over," he admitted.

"You overdid it a little. It's a skill, drinking. Like politics."

"Uh-huh."

"Speaking of politics, Vit', you caused a real stir in the papers. *Black Flag's* never had so much publicity."

Vito flushed. "It's not my fault. Some damned reporter followed me, just to try to ruin my father."

Sergio smiled wryly and nodded.

“They followed my grandmother, too, even my brother.”

“I know, I know, we all watch television. Your clan’s been pretty busy. Don’t any of you ever spend a night at home?”

Vito tried to laugh. “We do get around.”

“You get around a little too much. The Green Cockatoo’s thrown us out.”

Vito gulped. “Oh.”

“We have to lie low for a while.”

Vito whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Sergio tossed his head. “Not your fault. Not really. Anarchists are always persecuted. Everybody thinks we’re all murderers, mad bombers, crazy bastards. Maybe we are crazy.” He shook his head bitterly. “After all, to be an anarchist you have to believe that people can cooperate, live together, work together peaceably without fearing policemen or armies. That we don’t have to hurt each other to survive. Maybe believing all that really is crazy.” His handsome face suddenly looked lost as a child’s. Then he smiled. “So. What are you reading today?”

Vito blinked. “I don’t know. Just killing time.”

“What did time ever do to you? Forget it, bad joke. Hey, how about Gibbon? Interesting parallels between us and the ancient Romans.”

Vito shook his head. “Nothing that requires brains. I don’t want to think, not today.”

Sergio nodded.

“Everything’s so weird ...”

“Sure, sure. Look, kid, I hate to say this, but ... it’s probably best you don’t hang out here. With me, I mean. Someone might see.”

“Oh. Okay.” Vito stepped back. “Sorry. Good idea. Okay.”

Sergio pointedly looked out the window.

Vito ducked his head down and slunk away.

The clouds had come lower and grown dark, the gray walls of the buildings pressed in suffocatingly. Vito passed the bakery of Sig.ra Bassano. The shop was closed, the windows dark. There was no smoke from the chimney. Good! Vito thought. Serves her right! Her stupidity’s costing her. Simple justice. Imagine, making false statements, getting her sister to say she’s that girl’s aunt just to help two stupid kids get married. I wonder if she’ll go to jail? Okay, okay, she doesn’t deserve that, even if she did break the law. But the law doesn’t matter, it’s what’s right that really matters. But the law *does* matter, how else can you tell people what’s right and wrong? But she didn’t mean any harm, any more than I did. But she did screw us all to hell. But Pietro and the girl wanted to get married.

But but but but but! Everything is so complicated! It would be so much easier

if the world were just black and white, so a fellow could figure things out once and for all and get on with his life! But she really did screw everything up. The whole plot stinks of gothic romance novels. All it lacks is a villainous old monk or a vengeful lord, servants for comic relief, a midnight escape, and secret messages to have all the clichés in place... .

“Psst!”

Vito stopped. His surprise turned instantly to chagrin. Oh no, a secret message.

“Psst!”

He looked around but saw no one. Then a shadow moved behind the statue of General Ludovico. “Psst, Vito!”

“Pietro!” Vito shouted.

“Shut up! You want everyone to hear? Hurry, before someone sees.”

Vito went around the statue. Pietro skulked there, and behind him stood the Roijnan girl, looking nervous but very pretty now that she wasn’t crying.

“Piet’, you asshole.” Vito gave his brother a quick hug, then stepped back, hands on hips, immediately in inquisition mode. “What are you up to now? Where’ve you been? What do you think— Sorry, Signorina. I mean Signora. We don’t know each other. I guess I’m your brother-in-law.”

Elena nodded. “Elena, little brother.”

“Vito, little sister.”

“Ssh!” Pietro grabbed him and pulled him into the shadow.

“Watch my shirt,” Vito scolded.

“Shut up!”

“Listen, dear brother, you can’t order me around anymore, get it? Pa’s never going to hold you up to me as a model of virtue again. No more ‘Why can’t you be like Pietro?’ Oh, no! You screwed up, and screwed up big.” He pointed at Elena.

Pietro looked ill. “You know.”

“Of course I know. Who doesn’t know? The town knows, the country knows, the whole world knows!” He clucked his tongue. “You’ve destroyed your family, aren’t you sorry?”

“Me!” Pietro protested. “What about you? Caught red-handed with anarchists! Terrible!”

“How’d you know about that?” Vito demanded.

“It’s all over the news.”

Vito gaped. “Piet’! Watching television on your wedding day?”

Pietro blushed to his ears. Elena, rubbing her aching feet, looked up with a grin. “Well, Vito, you can’t consummate a wedding every single minute.”

Now Vito blushed.

“Anyway,” she went on, “we’d obviously already enjoyed the honeymoon before the wedding.”

Vito laughed. “I think you and I are going to get along fine.”

“How’s everybody doing?” Pietro asked.

“How do you think? It’s awful. Papa says he’s going to go crazy and dance naked in the streets, but I think he’s already gone crazy with his clothes on. Mama’s crying. Grandmama’s crying. Pietro, you’ve got to come home or we’ll be flooded out.”

Pietro sat on the pedestal. “We can’t go home. Anywhere we go, the police will come and take Elena away.”

“You did break the law, but I don’t think they’d actually lock you up. It’s a civil offense, not a dangerous criminal act. Anyway, you’re married, even if they take her away they couldn’t keep you apart for long.”

“They could annul us. Her father’s just the type to try that.” Pietro frowned with determination. “I won’t let them part us for even a second.”

Elena took his hand and said with pride, “No.”

“Anyway, her father’ll kill me. It’s hopeless.”

Vito shrugged. “So of course you think you have to run away.”

Pietro’s eyes went wide with frenzy. “But where to? We haven’t got any money. I need to find a job. How can we go? What’ll we eat? She’s going to have a baby!” He shook his head. “No, it’s hopeless. The whole world’s against us.”

Vito looked to the heavens. “Oh yes, the whole world’s against you. The whole world has nothing better to do than mess around with two kids who got into trouble. Well, isn’t that what you wanted when you ran off and got married under false pretenses? It’s so romantic!” he mocked. “Now you’re stuck with the romance instead of a warm bed and three meals a day. That’s your trouble,” Vito went on in full rant, “not the baby. It’s this stupid romantic attitude. If you weren’t romantic, you wouldn’t have fallen in love with a foreigner, you wouldn’t have jumped in the sack with her — sorry, little sister — you wouldn’t have hidden it when you found out she was pregnant, and most important, you wouldn’t have sneaked around and gotten married without telling anybody. Didn’t all that Greek and Latin teach you anything about logic? I always thought you were smart, that you were rational, too rational, never having any fun. But now we find out you’re just a sentimentalist and *I’m* the rational one! Here, I’ll explain: you think with your crotch, not your head, and to cover up the truth you make up romantic fantasies. And not even happy fantasies, but tragic ones! Well, now reality’s reared its ugly head. You went and did the romantic thing, but you

don't have any money, you don't have any place to go. Welcome to romance! This is how it is for star-crossed lovers. Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Guinevere and Lancelot ..."

"They all died," Elena interrupted. "We don't want to die."

"Then take my advice. Be more like me, use your head!"

Elena said, "I'm not thrilled with your analysis, because Pietro and I really do love each other. We don't just think with our crotches, as you put it."

"Sorry," Vito said.

"But we *have* messed everything up, all along the way. No matter what happened, we made it worse." She turned to Pietro. "Why didn't you tell me your little brother was so smart?"

"He's not. He's been listening to those anarchist friends of his. That's where you got all this intellectual crap, isn't it?"

"They're not my friends!" Vito yelled. His voice flew as high as a little boy's. "I only went there once, just once!"

Pietro slapped his hand over Vito's mouth. "All right, all right, I'm not accusing you."

Vito pushed Pietro's hand away. "Everyone persecutes me! I visit some harmless anarchists once and suddenly I'm a criminal. *You* go and marry the daughter of a man who punched Pa and got him fired and everyone goes, 'Boo hoo, my poor baby! Boo hoo, boo hoo! Where's my little Pietro!'"

"Really?" Pietro said with a smile.

"Yes, really! Okay," he shrugged off his rage, "the world's unjust. Got to get used to it if I'm going to be right all the time. Anyway, you have to come home."

"No."

"Why not?"

Pietro hung his head. "They'll yell at me."

"Good grief. Didn't I just tell you they were crying?"

"They're crying now, but if I come in ..."

Elena said, "But we have to go somewhere, Piet'. We can't go to my home, Papa'd kill you."

"Even if they do get mad at you," Vito said, "what do you think'll happen when they see her? They'll knock each other out of the way to coo over her."

Pietro took a deep breath. "You think so?"

"Good grief."

Pietro thought a moment, looked at Elena, who nodded, and shrugged. The three trooped off to via Calvino. Pietro hesitated at the door, but Elena kissed his cheek, so up the stairs they went.

When they reached the apartment, Vito called out loudly, "Hey, Mama!" But

no one answered. He and Pietro glanced at each other. Vito waved for them to enter. "Mama?" he called again.

They heard a noise from the library. "They're still watching the damned news," Vito whispered. "It's all they do anymore. Come on, we'll surprise them."

"Oh, no," Elena whispered. "They might faint."

But Vito was already at the library door. Pietro swallowed hard and took Elena's hand. They peeked in and stopped in amazement at the sight.

Sig.ra Sette stood in front of the television, watching intently. Behind her danced — danced! — Giuliana. Onesti jumped around his wife like a flamenco dancer, beating the floor with his suit jacket and stamping his feet arrhythmically. And pacing in the background was Sig. Galli, notepad and pen in hand, furiously writing.

As one, they turned and saw the children.

"Oh!" cried Giuliana. She stopped in mid-pirouette and raced to Pietro, caught him up in a bone-cracking embrace. "Piet', my Piet'!"

Onesti dropped his jacket and hurried up, hands outstretched. "My boy, my good boy, and look, our daughter-in-law!" He seized Pietro's hand and shook it wildly while wrapping the other arm around a wondering Elena.

"At last!" Sig.ra Sette said. "Where have you been, you naughty children? You're the bride? Oh, how pretty you are! So much prettier than those pictures in the papers. Giuli', isn't she lovely! But come, sit down. Ugo, Giuli', let them sit down, she must be exhausted."

Galli approached with a broad smile. "The prodigals have returned, and just in time, just in the nick of time! Now we can really get down to business."

Vito stood in a daze. He watched his mother and grandmother drag Elena to the sofa and give her a pillow, run to fetch water and milk and biscuits, while Onesti held Pietro by the shoulders and danced him round and round, chattering nonsense.

Suddenly Vito hollered, "*Stop!*"

The adults turned to him.

"What's going on?" Vito said. "Why were you dancing? Why aren't you crying? What the hell is all this?"

The adults laughed.

Galli said, "Out of the mouths of babes."

"Our little font of wisdom," Onesti chuckled. "Always practical, always getting right down to brass tacks."

This frightened Vito more than ever. "You've really done it! You've gone crazy! All of you!" He stumbled back to the door. "I'm calling the police! The

Department of Health!”

Galli laughed. “What a little joker.”

“No, no,” Pietro pleaded. “Tell us, why are you acting so crazy?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Galli said. “Don’t you read the papers? Especially *The People’s Voice*? The wonderful *People’s Voice*! Well, young folks today just aren’t political.”

Vito restrained an impulse to put his hands around the old man’s wattled neck.

“What?” Pietro demanded.

Giuliana said to Elena, “Don’t worry, dear, your papa and mama will be here soon.”

Elena went yellow with fright. “What? Here? Oh God!”

“Yes, love. Sig. Galli, will you telephone the embassy to let them know?”

“Immediately, dear lady.” He pulled out his cellphone.

Vito grabbed hold of the door jamb to steady himself. “I’ll ask you again, calmly and quietly. What the hell is going on?”

Onesti danced up and embraced him with wild glee. “It’s all over, my boy, completely and finally over! Or I should say, it’s just beginning. That idiot Zanni is finished!”

Pietro stared. “Huh?”

“I’m back running for office, and I’ll win, too, it’s going to be a landslide! ‘Onesti’s a member of Parliament, carries every bill he chooses!’” he sang.

Galli put his hand over the cellphone. “Parliament? That’s nothing. We’re going to run you for president!”

Vito said, “President?”

“You bet! After Zanni’s thrown out.”

“The first European president to be impeached. It’s historic,” Sig.ra Sette said proudly.

“No, dear signora, don’t forget Paxas of Lithuania.”

“Oh, yes, Paxas, yes,” she said gaily. “I forgot. Well, the first *real* European president to be impeached.”

Galli fondly watched Onesti dancing. “Your papa’s a national hero, and he’ll stay that way this time, I promise you that.”

The young people stared.

“You don’t understand. But the news is everywhere! That criminal Zanni kidnapped your father, Miss Mitek. I mean, Sig.ra Onesti.”

Elena shrieked. “Papa!”

“Don’t worry, love,” Giuliana said, “he escaped.”

“And he ran right to *The People’s Voice*.”

“I’m subscribing immediately,” Onesti vowed.

“But but but but,” Vito stammered, “you’re back in the race?”

“Dear old Karl blew the cover off the whole plot,” Onesti explained. “That ass Zanni, he tried to force him to say that he’d bribed me — me! — just to try to destroy my candidacy. Imagine! As if anyone would bribe me to do anything. So the whole conspiracy’s been revealed, how he’s been trying to swing the election, how he got spies to follow you all around and make things up about you. It’s all Zanni!”

“And Pucci, don’t forget Pucci,” said Galli.

Onesti stamped the floor again, ratatatat. “Pu-Pu-Pu-Pucci!”

“Pucci is the brain of Zanni.”

“The brain is dead! Long live the brain!” Onesti roared.

“And your father was the victim of the plot,” Galli said. “Oh, he has a marvelous future in politics!”

“Have they arrested Zanni?” Vito asked.

“No, no, of course not, one doesn’t arrest presidents,” Galli replied.

“Naturally he said the whole mess is just a misunderstanding, that it’s a plot against him. But the people won’t let themselves be fooled again. Look at him, boys — your father could be the next president of Serenno!”

Onesti’s feet went ratatatatatat.

Vito whistled. He wondered if he had been wasting his time touting the importance of rationality in the world, rather than cultivating an appreciation of the absurd.

IN THE HAPPY, peaceful country of Serenno, where the weather is always pleasing and people mind their own business, the news that President Zanni had kidnapped a Roijnan raced through the land and the populace raised its voice in outrage. The Conservatives demanded an investigation into Mitek's outrageous, unfounded, incredible claims. The Progressives demanded that Zanni be turned out of office. The Communists demanded that Zanni be arrested and imprisoned. The Socialists demanded that Zanni be rehabilitated. The various labor unions demanded nothing, because they could not agree on a date to hold a meeting to determine their demands.

Internationally, the leaders of every land expressed revulsion that anyone in so exalted a post should have done anything so terrible and not hidden it better. The High Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared, "This is a shameful moment in the politics of contemporary Europe." The Prime Minister of the Czech Republic declaimed, "This is a black day for Serenno, a black day for Europe, a black day for all the world." The Federal Chancellor of Germany intoned, "All civilized nations must abominate such a striking offense against the most basic human rights." The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom enunciated, "We should remember that these serious allegations have not been confirmed. However, if true, we must take every measure to restore political balance to the region." And the President of the United States barked, "This mockery of international law cannot be tolerated! Military intervention may be necessary!"

Television pundits in Serenno held forth: the liberals suggested that perhaps Parliament might consider another inquiry into the matter, the conservatives that the affair was a Roijnan plot to undermine Zanni and therefore everyone should rally round the President to support him against the liberal dogs who betrayed their country with every breath.

"But," said one pundit, "an inquiry might restore some faith in our political system."

"Liberal nonsense!" howled another pundit. "Even to admit the possibility that this web of lies could be true supports the Roijnan radicals and the Serennian liberals who are trying to destroy our way of life! Do you want to overturn the State?"

"I never said—"

President Zanni sprang to defend himself with his accustomed course: attack.

He put his staff into action generating press releases and telephoning influential persons for quotes. The *Post* fell in line with a front-page article by Davide Delsano asserting that Mitek had tried to bribe the President himself in order to get his hands on the munitions factory and was therefore arrested legally. Maria Santata wrote another article (with no byline) asserting, first, that Mitek was never in Serenno; second, that if Mitek was in Serenno, he was never in Fricchi; third, that if Mitek had somehow made his way to Fricchi, he certainly had never seen the President.

The People's Voice, circulation soaring so high that it began publishing first twice, then three times a week, countered with a series of interviews with the ex-ministers. Each minister denied any knowledge of the incident.

Anna Fadena asked Sig. Luca, "Why did you resign your post?"

"For personal reasons."

"And why did Sig. Vaghi resign? And Sig.ra Frusoni? And even Sig. Fedoro?"

"You will have to ask them. I never speak for others. I can only confirm that I have in fact resigned, and whatever happened following my resignation is outside my knowledge. I have no further comment."

Every one of the former cabinet members responded in the same way, except Eufemia Frusoni.

"What happened during that cabinet meeting to cause you to resign so dramatically?"

"The President made demands I was unable to accept. And it wasn't particularly dramatic."

"What sort of demands?"

"That, Ms. Fadena, is between the President and me."

"The people have a right to know."

"The people have no right to invade my personal life."

When the interviews appeared — all four in one issue, in parallel columns on the front page, a brilliant stroke of typography by Fazi — the identical response from each spoke louder than any dramatic revelation.

"Damned rebels!" Zanni screeched. "If I could get my hands on them, they'd never open their mouths again!" He studied Pucci with suspicion.

Protesters appeared outside the Federal Palace and the President's home, first a few, then ten, then more and more as the days passed, until fifty, ninety, hundreds marched, with signs and banners that read, "Zanni: No! No! No!" or "Clean This House!"

Pucci secretly hired men to protest the protesters. They called themselves the National Republican Movement, but the papers, even the *Post*, immediately

labeled them “Zannis.” Because they were few, they bellowed all the louder to be heard. When three hundred Socialists marched past the Federal Palace and six Zannis in blue shirts cursed them out and hanged Mitek in effigy, it was a photo of the Zannis that appeared next day on the front pages. When two unidentified Zannis in blue shirts threw a bucket of green paint over the Green Party member who had just unsuccessfully demanded a special vote to bring impeachment proceedings against Zanni, it was the Zannis, in sharply pressed and starched blue shirts, whom the radio stations interviewed, not the lacquered Green. And when Ugo Onesti attracted more than two thousand people to a rally in Vedeia and a group of twelve Zannis in blue heckled him, threw bottles and stones at the stage, and generally disrupted the rally, it was film of the Zannis, not of Onesti, that the television stations broadcast.

Oddly, despite the increasing violence of their actions, no Zanni was ever arrested or charged with any offense.

“We will prevail, Pucci, you’ll see,” Zanni said doggedly. “The people can’t keep a single idea in their heads for two minutes together. All we have to do is repeat whatever we want them to think. Say anything three times and the people will believe it, say it five times and the poor boobs will think they came up with it themselves.”

Pucci, who had himself taught this sad precept to the President, remained prudently silent.

Soon the Zannis managed to appear within minutes whenever a protest began. They would attack the protesters with curses, kicks, rocks, and bottles, then miraculously vanish before the police arrived, who then arrested large numbers of the protesters who had just been attacked.

The President made many television appearances in those days and delivered the same message each time. “I say now, as I have said all along, this is a plot against me and against our political process. Serenno is under attack! We Serennians are simple, friendly, naive folk. Perhaps too naive, too friendly. We aren’t able to defend ourselves against the wiles of these cunning traitors. Honorable, trusting men and women are always at a disadvantage, because liars speak louder than we do. But the truth will out. I welcome an investigation ...”

Yet Zanni worked desperately behind the scenes to delay any proposed investigation. He pleaded, he threatened, he promised, he procrastinated. He wondered whether he could shut down Parliament. “Isn’t there some special provision we can use in case of crisis? If this isn’t a crisis, what is?”

Pucci only shrugged and remained prudently silent.

Often, when the President was on one television show or another, Pucci would step outside the studio after making certain his absence would not be

noted. The President's diatribe lasted exactly six minutes, with another two or three minutes for sycophantic questions from the interviewer. Plenty of time for a breath of fresh, free air. He would stand outside with the President's big bodyguard and say to him, "So, what are we reading today, Italo?" And Grop would respond, "*Doktor Faustus*," or "*The Brothers Karamazov*," or "*Pan Tadeus*."

"Ah, a little light reading today, eh?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

Pucci sighed. "Sometimes one needs a good book."

"Yes, sir, I've often found that to be so, thank you."

"I envy you. I don't know how you find the time, what with the President at you night and day, never giving you a moment's peace."

"Yes, sir, thank you."

Following each of the President's television appearances, Leo Fazi would publish a telling interview with Karl Mitek or Ambassador Jak Vlaamstad, or demand again that charges be pressed against the President. After each protest, after every attack by the Zannis, Fazi would publish another article marveling at Onesti's astounding success, the poorly attended rallies Canale and the Conservatives held, the continuing scandal of the Stanco trial, now in its final days.

"That damned *Voice*!" Zanni raged. "Did you see the cartoon they published today? We ought to shut them down."

Pucci said laconically, "They haven't done anything illegal."

"There has to be something. Why don't you find something, Pucci? What am I paying you for? You never do anything anymore. You never take the initiative. I have to do everything myself, absolutely everything. Remember, without me you're nothing! Now get out there and earn your salary, or I'll find someone who will!"

A few nights later the offices of *The People's Voice* were vandalized. Persons unknown smashed the windows, smashed the furniture and equipment, scrawled threatening graffiti across the walls: "Traitors!" "Go back to Roijna!" "Beg For Mercy!"

Fazi stood amidst the wreckage and scratched his bald head. Anna stood nearby, tears watering her cheeks.

"Don't cry," Fazi said. "What did you expect?"

"Not this," she said.

He sighed. "I'm just surprised it didn't happen sooner."

Anna squatted and picked up two keys broken from her old Adler typewriter, D and O. "That this could happen here," she whispered.

“Anywhere,” Fazi said. “If the people let it.” He clapped his hands. “Well, to work.”

She looked up, lost. “How?”

“How?” His voice rose, strong. “Anyhow we can! We’ve got a paper to get out. Now more than ever, *The People’s Voice* must be heard.”

The Arts Festival limped to its opening ceremony. Another thirty-five artists had canceled in protest at the asserted crimes of the President of Serenno. Only twelve arrived to bring culture to Fricchi. Sig.ra Zanni tiptoed around the scandal in her opening address.

“My international friends,” she declaimed, “this Festival of the Arts, the first in the history of our country, shows that diverse nations and peoples can come together to forget their differences, their disagreements, their prejudices here in the bosom of the arts. The arts join all peoples in a league of peace and harmony. This First Serennian Festival of the Arts has drawn ... a number of artists and performing groups from around the world, from Albania, China, Finland, France, Germany, Roijna—”

Here shouts interrupted the address, cries of “Throw ’em out!” “Down with Roijna!” and, opposing, “Viva Roijna!” “Ma Bang rocks!”

“—and,” Sig.ra Zanni struggled on, “Canada and the United States. My friends—” the cries grew louder “—in the sacred bosom of the arts we can forget trivial matters, ignore our petty grievances, and contemplate the eternal verities of beauty, truth—”

“Let’s hear a little truth, Sig.ra Zanni!” someone yelled.

“—justice—”

“Justice!” people chanted. “Justice for Roijna!” or “Justice for Serenno!”

“—and love!”

Sig.ra Zanni left the dais shaking with fear and fury. The majority of the audience applauded politely.

The festival proceeded as such things do: an exposition of paintings and sculptures, which no one liked but before which everyone hummed and nodded; an orchestral concert of music made up more of noise than melody; a reading of poems in a language no one present understood, causing the poet to emote ever more dramatically; theatrical presentations with puppets, mimes, the deaf, the blind; and a ballet with nearly nude dancers who twitched to a mash-up of music by Handel, Louis Armstrong, and the Sex Pistols.

The President was not present at many of the performances. He was busy, desperately busy with meetings, television appearances, and speeches. Without a cabinet he should have depended even more on Pucci, but instead he made plans

without Pucci's knowledge, organized his own calendar, even stooped to writing a few speeches of his own. Zanni reveled in this newfound independence and gloried in the power that was his. But to retain the common touch that had once made him so popular, he frequently displayed an almost violent bonhomie, extended even to Italo Grop. When Zanni hurried to his limousine to head for yet another television appearance or meeting, he clapped Grop on the shoulder and grinned, "Back in the saddle, eh, Grot?" When he returned to his office after a weary day of scheming and conspiring and politicking, he dismissed the bodyguard with a warm smile. "Off you go, Gurk, get some rest. As for me, it never ends, eh?"

On the second day of the festival, Zanni finally met with the Roijnan ambassador, Jak Vlaamstad. What happened at this meeting no one can say; the door was closed and Angelica Bosco took no notes. But Sig. Vlaamstad left the Palace with a dark expression, and when Zanni reappeared, he was beaming.

Reporters demanded, "Sig. President! Sig. President!"

Zanni whispered to Grop, "The hounds are baying, Grip. But they won't catch this old bird."

That night, protesters massed outside the theater, the concert house, and the exposition. "Justice before Art!" they chanted. "False Art = False Politics!" "Truth, Not Tricks!" Zannis also showed up, of course, hurling threats, then bottles, then bricks. They attacked, hit, kicked, and the protesters were routed. Triumphant, the Zannis cheered and pumped their fists into the air. That was what was shown on the evening news.

Sig.ra Zanni angrily described the scene to her husband at bedtime. "What an embarrassment for us! The whole world has its eye on us, Bobo, and we look like barbarians."

Zanni was watching a Roijnan television program where the author Sholz again expressed his unasked-for opinion that the President of Serenno was insane. "Zanni hides himself behind the skirts of Art, but Art won't shield him from the truth. The people demand that he take off the mask. The people demand that we do away with lies. Down with masks! Down with lies! And down with President Zanni!"

"You see!" Sig.ra Zanni cried. "We're a laughingstock. What are you going to do about it?"

The next night the Zannis gathered, even though there were no protesters. There were more than fifty of them, and not all paid by Pucci: the gang was becoming popular. They carried signs that read, "Down With Foreigners!" "Serenno for Serennians!" "Modern Art is Shit!" "Go Back Where You Come From!"

Zanni, in his office, held the telephone away from his ear as his wife's shrill voice reverberated from the earpiece. "But dear," he barked, "what can I do? ... No, of course not, they shouldn't be allowed to do this. But what do you expect me to do about it? ... Yes, dearest, yes, I know. ... I know! I can't talk now, I'm in an important meeting. ... Yes, yes, I'll do something. ... I don't know what, but something!"

He hung up and looked around his office, empty except for Grop, who sat in a small chair by the door. Zanni flashed a weak smile. "Women," he said. "They just don't understand how the world works, do they, Grup?"

In Borgo there had also been daily protests; small protests, but persistent. Before the Town Hall marched six or seven Socialists with their signs: "Government for the People, Government by the People," "Sweep Out Corruption," "Loyalty, Not Royalty." This last was held by Vito, proud of his wordplay. When the protesters chanted, "No Zanni! No Zanni! No, no, no Zanni!" he chanted louder than any.

Some passersby smiled, some frowned, some applauded, most shook their heads and hurried on.

There came the sound of a distant drum, rataplan rataplan, cutting like a buzzsaw through the staid chanting of the protesters. Vito turned to see a line of people march around the corner, dressed in black and wearing funny masks, blowing tin whistles, shaking tambourines. Their signs read, "No Zanni! No Elections! No Government!" and "Government IS Corruption" and "Down with Politics! Up with Humanity!"

Vito grinned. Anarchists.

The black-clad marchers passed the Socialists hooting and dancing. One of them punched Vito on the shoulder. "Out on the streets now, huh? You're making progress, kid," said Sergio from behind a Darth Vader mask. "But with Socialists? You might as well be marching in a nursery school. Still, it's a step forward, kid, congratulations."

A masked woman gave Sergio a push. "March, brother, march, it's a waste of time to argue with children." Vito recognized Gisela behind the mask. He blushed but forced himself to laugh.

"I don't agree," Sergio said. "Talking is how people learn ..."

"I know all about your talk. March!"

The anarchists passed on. The Socialists raised their chant again, "No Zanni! No Zanni! No, no, no!"

The last day of the arts festival was the day before the by-election. The final concert was Ma Bang, the Roijnan rock star. A huge audience without a single sign in sight appeared at the concert hall, and when the Zannis showed up, chanting, "Serenno for Serennians!" the crowd booed and chased them away. So the concert began peacefully, with police posted around the building. When the band came on stage, the audience erupted with cheers, bravi, hurrahs, and when the show started with Ma Bang's hit "Be Good," the audience screamed to blow the roof off.

At last, thought Sig.ra Zanni in her box seat, closing her eyes against the din. At last a success.

Ma Bang segued directly into her second song, "Without You." The audience applauded and cheered at the end, rattling the walls. Ma Bang called out, "Hello, Serenno!"

"Hello, Ma Bang!" the audience shouted as one.

Ma Bang rasped, "Glad to see there are still a few sane folks in Fricchi."

Most of the spectators laughed and applauded.

"So for all of you who aren't flaming assholes ... let's rock!"

One hollered "Boo!" drifted across the auditorium, but it was drowned in a huge shout of "Yes!" Sig.ra Zanni pointedly stood and left her place in the center loge, but no one noticed.

Ma Bang sang like a gravel truck skidding on an icy highway, but she was a virtuoso on the guitar. She also played electric violin for the song "UFOs," causing the audience to practically swoon. She danced around the stage like a ballerina during "Art for Art's Sake," and the audience danced in the aisles and on their seats. She sang the ballad "Drowned Mary," and the audience wept on cue.

Halfway through the concert some new spectators entered the dark auditorium. They stood along the back wall behind those who had paid for standing room. They did not applaud at the ends of songs. They did not dance. They did not bounce their heads in time to the overpowering beat. They wore blue shirts.

Ma Bang sang the fast song "Little Boys." When she hit the last chord, the crowd went crazy. She raised a hand, waited until quiet came. "God," she said, "you all must've been starved for live entertainment."

Roars of laughter and applause.

"Not much good music in Fricchi these days, huh? Been suffering from too much culture?"

Roars.

"All right. All right. I'm glad I came." Applause. "You know," she mumbled

into the microphone, “some folks told me I shouldn’t come. You all haven’t been so friendly to us Roijnans lately.”

“Ma Bang! Ma Bang!” chanted the crowd.

“Some people said, ‘Hey, Ma, don’t you go over there. It’s a bad time. Those Serennians are crazy.’”

Scattered applause that quickly faded.

“I said, ‘Yeah, they’re crazy, all right.’”

Silence.

She looked around and grinned. “Crazy for rock ’n’ roll!”

Cheers.

She strode around the stage, hit random chords on her guitar till the ovation died down. “Yeah, yeah. Can’t blame you good people for what’s been going down. It’s just that crazy fucker at the top who’s fucking everything to hell.”

A large part of the audience cheered. But many did not.

“Yeah, fucking us all. His good lady wife still here?” She squinted out into the dark auditorium. “Looks like she chickened out. Good. We can talk freely among ourselves. You got to watch these guys at the top, people. Don’t let ’em pull this kind of shit. Not good. You don’t fuck over your neighbors like that. Not cool, guys, not cool.”

A few in the audience applauded uncertainly.

Ma Bang said, “But, hey, it’s your country, not mine. You’re the folks who have to clean up this mess. Have a drink, roll up your sleeves, start mopping.”

“If you don’t like it, go back to Roijna!” someone shouted from the back of the hall.

Ma Bang peered out into the audience. “Yeah? Fuck you, asshole.”

“Shut up!” some cried.

“Ssh!” others hissed.

“All right, all right, sorry, lost my head there,” Ma Bang said. “I want to be polite tonight. After all, I’m a guest in your country.”

“Hit the road!”

Ma Bang’s eyes narrowed. Then she grinned. “Tell you what. If that asshole’ll shut his fucking mouth, I’ll sing you all a new song I wrote just for him and all the people like him, yeah. A new ballad. You want to hear it?”

Many applauded. Someone at the back yelled, “Boo!”

Ma Bang came down front and sat at the edge of the stage, legs dangling over the edge. Her band shuffled in the background, looked at each other and shrugged. Ma Bang tuned her guitar down and said, “Okay, this is for the mean fuck in the back who can’t keep his mouth shut.” And she sang, simply as a folk song, without her customary antics.

*In the happy little country of Serenno,
Everybody's sweet and good and fair and kind.
There is never any trouble,
Everyone lives in a bubble
And proudly remains deaf and dumb and blind.*

The audience chuckled and smiled. The bass player began to play along with Ma Bang.

*In the happy little country of Serenno,
You never hear a crude or ugly word.
So come sooner or come later,
You won't hear the word "dictator."
Everybody finds such little jokes absurd.*

Now most in the audience lost their smiles. The chuckles died out. Cries of "Boo!" increased. Ma Bang's drummer added a beat.

*In the happy little country of Serenno,
When your President Zanni bends the law,
Though all other countries grumble,
"What's the bother?" you all mumble.
"Mind your business," you retort, "and pass the slaw."*

Some — not just those in the rear — shouted, "Fuck you, Bang!" Ma Bang paused in mid-chord, but only for a moment. She modulated up a fifth and sang the last verse.

*In the happy little country of Serenno,
You're a terrorist if you knock upon a door.
They will lock you up politely
And politely beat you nightly,
And politely plunge all Europe into war.*

The audience was now standing.

Ma Bang climbed back to her feet and stepped to the rear of the stage with her band. The musicians gathered around her. She raised both hands. "Hey, people, calm down—"

A bottle hit the stage at her feet and shattered in a spray of glass. She jumped to the left.

The drummer, trying to stand, fell backwards with a crash of cymbals.

"Shit," Ma Bang muttered to her bass player. "Think I fucked up?"

"Serenno for Serennians! Serenno for Serennians!" the crowd yelled. "Down

with Ma Bang! Down with Roijna!” Someone tore an arm off one of the seats and threw it on the stage. Another hurled a backpack.

Outside the hall, Sig.ra Zanni sat in her limousine. When the first few people ran out of the hall, she leaned forward to watch. More people ran out, and more, and more. Some began to punch each other. One or two tried to climb the concert house wall. Several threw rocks at the streetlights until one struck with a shower of glass.

Sig.ra Zanni sat back. “Matteo,” she said calmly to the driver, “let’s go home.”

In the auditorium, someone in a blue shirt lit a string of firecrackers. The crowd panicked and spilled out into the streets. For some reason the police were nowhere to be seen, although there had been dozens of officers stationed around the hall before the concert. Ma Bang and her band escaped by hiding in a Volkswagen van and racing for the border. The crowd tore down streetlights, overturned cars, smashed windows.

Now, in order to understand what happened next during this excess of patriotic spirit, one must suffer a brief lesson in urban planning.

Fricchi, as capitol of Serenno, suffers the fate of all capitol cities: lack of funds for its own infrastructure. The reserve funds for the most basic necessities have been consistently emptied over the years to indulge the many whims of whatever elected official could convince or bypass or wear down the opposition. And so in the early years of the present century, when the ancient sewers of Fricchi were being rebuilt, the general contractor who was awarded the bid happened to be the brother-in-law of the mayor, and in order to complete the project on the budget proposed (and yet to enjoy an appropriate profit on the work), he used substandard materials and untrained labor. For many years the sewers functioned, though not efficiently, but recently most of the vents that relieved the poisonous gases fermenting below street level had either collapsed completely or become plugged with rubbish. Consequently, the pressure of these gases had increased to such a point that residents could smell them through their drains and about their toilets, though they dismissed this as just another minor discomfort common to city life. The Superintendent of Public Works warned repeatedly of the danger of ignoring this problem, but there were always more pressing needs, and the Superintendent was a Progressive and generally ignored by the Conservative administration.

So it was that when one of the Zannis tossed a firecracker into a sewer opening, the laws of chemistry and physics played out along their inevitable lines. A series of explosions raced throughout the Central Plaza. Streets heaved up, curbs crumbled, buildings teetered. The streetlights went out and the center

of the city flickered into darkness. People screamed inside the darkened buildings and poured out into the rocking streets.

The next day, with grave demeanor and hidden joy, President Bobo Zanni prepared to declare a state of national emergency in Serenno.

THE POLLS OPENED for the by-election at dawn. The public was already lined up to vote, and early exit polls showed that Ugo Onesti would take the provincial parliamentary seat by a landslide over Dario Canale. The Progressive, Yolanda Nova, was also running ahead of Canale. Even the little-known Socialist and Communist candidates were ahead of Canale. But Onesti was ahead of them all.

“This by-election,” one early-morning newscaster opined, “is effectively a referendum on the corrupt Zanni administration. As the province goes, so goes the nation.”

Onesti and Galli watched the television returns in the provisional campaign headquarters, nicer than the local Green Party office because it was above street level and had windows. Onesti sat riveted by the numbers scrolling across the screen, a mixture of wonder and pride and nausea in his face. Galli sat like a boulder in a rippling stream of notes and messages from his army of assistants.

“First results from Lindoro, we’re ahead by thirty votes. From Val de Maggiore, we have a 20% lead. In Princi, Nova’s leading.”

“Oh,” Onesti gulped, “really?”

“She was born in Princi.”

Then, at ten o’clock, the news was interrupted by a special broadcast from the Federal Palace. All radio and television stations carried the President’s declaration simultaneously.

“My friends,” President Zanni said gravely, but with an expression of unseemly glee, “last night an infamous attack was launched against our fair land. The Roijnan singer Ma Bang incited a riot in the State Concert Hall, a riot that engulfed the entire center of the capital. Ma Bang vanished, but there followed a series of explosions, the cause of which is not yet determined. However, property loss has been severe. I know you will join me in giving thanks to God that, as far as we are aware, there was no loss of life. While we continue investigating these dreadful events, we have no choice but to declare a nationwide state of emergency. I have already ordered the military to be ready to prevent further terrorism. All government offices and activities will be closed until further notice.

“My people, I ask that you do not panic. We are in no immediate danger. Our police and military will guard us against the insidious enemies who seek to destroy our way of life. Be brave. Be wary. Report any suspicious activity you witness immediately to the authorities. Together, we will show the world that

Serenno is strong, loyal, and will not yield to terror. Thank you.” Fade out to the fluttering green-and-gold of the flag of Serenno.

“I hope you were paying attention, Pucci,” Zanni said after the cameras switched off. “That was political genius in action. Two with one blow. Talk about distraction!”

Pucci raised one eyebrow, but he did not answer.

“What is he playing at?” Galli mused in his most funereal tones.

Onesti gaped at the television. “What?” he rasped. “A riot in Fricchi?”

“He’s starting a dangerous game. Marcus!” A young man raced up to him. “Get hold of Francesca and Stefano, find out what’s happening at their posts.” The young man rushed away. “What does Zanni think he’s doing?”

Onesti still stared at the television. “State of emergency?”

“The whole thing stinks of panic. That this should happen just now, when we’re almost certain of winning ... Marcus! What’s the word from the polls?”

The young man, on the telephone now, covered the mouthpiece. “It’s true, they’ve been closed.”

Galli nodded slowly.

“Stefano is in via Camerra. The poll workers kicked out the voters and locked the doors. The voters are just standing around.”

“What about Francesca?”

“Can’t get her yet.”

Another man looked up from an adjoining desk. “I’ve got Francesca on the line here.”

“What’s she say? Let me talk to her.” Galli reached over and grabbed the phone. “Francesca, Galli here, talk. Yes?” He covered the mouthpiece and said to Onesti, “They’ve closed the town offices, too. Go on,” he said into the phone. “Chained the doors? And? What are they doing with the ballots? Try to find out. Police everywhere? All right, get back here to the office. No, don’t challenge the police, we’ve got to appear cooperative. Yes.”

Onesti could not move. “They’ve closed the polls?”

Galli swung back to his own desk, grabbed the telephone, dialed. “That bastard had better not ... Damn, all circuits are busy. Marcus, call Russo on his cellphone, he’s in Fricchi. Hurry.”

“They’ve really closed the polls?” Onesti repeated. He felt cold all over. His fingers drummed on the desktop, but his feet had become blocks of stone. He looked at the room as through a foggy lens. The volunteers rushing back and forth seemed two-dimensional, cartoons. Part of him understood that he was in the first stage of shock. Just as if I had been in an accident, lost a limb, he thought. Should I do anything? Put my head between my knees?

“Russo? Galli here. What’s going on in Fricchi? Yes, just heard. Why didn’t you telephone? Yes, yes, but— Are you sure? Any evidence? It doesn’t make sense ... why would he? No, do nothing, say nothing, not till we can get our hands on some sort of proof. Oh, if he—!” He hung up. “Zanni’s gone clean out of his mind, that’s all there is to it. If Russo’s right ...”

Onesti sat still while the crowd whirled about him. He began to realize that from the moment Mitek had rung his doorbell, he had not had one quiet moment. First he was fired. Then he was interviewed. Then Galli appeared, enticing him to run for office. Then the endless round of rallies, speeches, smiling, parties, shaking hands, smiling, always smiling. Not one moment of silence. And Giuliana, too, had shaken too many hands, met too many strangers, smiled and smiled and smiled, without a complaint. Then the family scandals, one, two, three, a triple-punch that had left him reeling. He never, never would be able to live down the knowledge that his son had met with anarchists, or worse, that his mother-in-law wanted to vote against him. But there had been no time to recover, the Mitek kidnapping was exposed, the President — a man he had voted for, he remembered the satisfaction he had felt pushing that button — had committed a crime of international significance. And then suddenly the campaign was in full swing again in the final days before the election, life a wild round of rallies, parties, speeches, smiles, hands, strangers, smiles, smiles, smiles. It had been exciting. He had lost several kilos. But now, on the very brink of winning — the polls were closed. The police were deployed.

Really, Onesti thought, this is too much. It’s simply too much.

Galli’s deep voice never stopped. “Get a report from Kačni, hurry. Marcus, phone Vijnul, try to reach Mitek, find out if he’s safe, I don’t trust Zanni’s goons. Francesca, good,” he said as a woman in her fifties entered the room, “come over here. Get hold of Vlaamstad, we need to know the diplomatic reaction. That madman Zanni is going to start a war if we’re not careful.”

Onesti stood. He paused while the room rocked under his feet. When it had settled, he moved toward the door carefully.

Galli looked up. “Onesti, I don’t think— Where are you going?”

“I’m going home.”

“Are you sick?”

Ugo nodded and opened the door.

“Good idea,” Galli said, “get some rest. Can’t do any good here for now. We’ll need you fit and ready to move when everything calms down.”

Onesti went out.

On the street, the sun was shining, the wind blew clean and fresh. A few people walked along the sidewalk or stood at the corners, talking. Cars drove by.

Onesti wandered past shops, parks. Sometime later he found himself in the hills west of town. The houses here were few and far apart, open fields lay just beyond, there were groves of olive trees gray in the distance. Below him lay Borgo, lovely little Borgo, a jumble of white and yellow and gray walls and red roofs. Above him rose the hills, still green but just beginning to turn gold. Birdsong drifted to his ears. He could not remember the last time he had heard the song of birds, or the bleat of a sheep rather than the bleat of a politician. Onesti had always been a town man; for him, nature was something one visited twice a year on holiday. But at this moment he looked around at nature — calm, domesticated nature, to be sure, he was scarcely past the town limits — as a sort of miracle. Imagine! There was still a world out here full of living creatures that never once thought of politics, or spread scandal, and rarely even spared a moment to worry about human beings except to avoid them and their pointless, dangerous doings. A world that had happily existed for centuries, hundreds of centuries before man crawled out of the dust, and would likely exist long after this experiment in so-called consciousness ended. A world that did not care whether he won an election or the President started a war.

He moved as in a fog back down into town, not noticing the nervous faces of the people he passed. He reached via Calvino and waved politely to Oberto, the waiter of the Café Ris, who stood at the door with a cigarette in his mouth. He did not notice the three military LMVs that roared by. He floated up his stairs and opened the door to his apartment with a lighthearted “Papa’s home!”

No one answered. He heard voices in the library and went there.

Giuliana and Sig.ra Sette sat in front of the television. Giuliana held a handkerchief twisted between her fingers. Sig.ra Sette sat with her arms folded tightly across her breast.

“Papa’s home,” Onesti said again.

Giuliana looked up. “Oh, Ugo, thank goodness you’re safe!”

“That’s a funny thing to say. Why shouldn’t I be safe?”

“Because the whole country’s gone crazy, that’s why,” Sig.ra Sette said. “I’ve always loved my people, but now, well, the devil take them all.”

Onesti’s happy fog vanished with a sharp, sucking sound. “You mean that riot in Fricchi? That’s just—”

“Oh, forget the riot, who cares about a riot? But that Zanni, he’s called a state of emergency.”

“I know all that.”

“Everyone’s saying it’s going to be war.” His mother-in-law stood up and went out of the room.

“War?” Onesti said. He whistled. “But that’s crazy.”

Giuliana was furious. “War, Ugo! What should we do? We have two sons, two young boys. If there’s war they’ll surely have to go in the army. They’re just children, Ugo!”

Onesti came close and patted her arm. “There won’t be any war, Giuliana. It’s all just another of Zanni’s tricks. Galli explained it. He thinks Zanni called this state of emergency just to stop the election.”

Sig.ra Sette had come back into the room. “Is that true?”

Giuliana said, “Oh, he couldn’t do that. Could he? No one could be so wicked!”

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it were true,” Sig.ra Sette said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he started the riot and threw the bombs himself. He’s capable of anything. But to close the borders...”

“*What!*” cried Onesti.

“Where are the boys?” Giuliana asked suddenly.

“Yes,” Sig.ra Sette said, “he’s just closed the borders. ‘To protect our sacred nation,’ he says. Sacred! The whole world’s gone mad.”

Onesti felt the cold numbness rising up his limbs again. “What?”

“I haven’t seen Pietro or Vito since breakfast,” Giuliana said. “Ugo, where have they gone?”

The boys were standing on the promenade above the river. They watched three soldiers unenthusiastically placing barricades across the North Bridge. “What are they up to?” Pietro said. His fingers scratched nervously at the stone. “What do you think they’re doing?”

Vito leaned his elbows on the wall, chin in his palms. “Closing the borders.”

“Yes, but why?” Pietro said impatiently.

“Another one of Zanni’s brilliant ideas.”

“It’s so stupid!”

“That’s how we know it’s his.”

Pietro pressed his forehead against the stone. “Is he trying to start a war?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But he’s definitely trying to stop the election. What I don’t get is that the news doesn’t mention that as the real reason. Everyone knows Zanni would do anything to hold on to power, even risk a war, but no one says it out loud. Very interesting, psychologically speaking.”

Pietro groaned. “I’m not interested in psychology.”

“You should be, Piet’. This is historic. We’re watching history, bro’.”

“I don’t care about history!” Pietro yelled.

“Shut up.”

“Shut up yourself! Elena’s in Vijnul with her mother and father, I’m here, and

now those sons of bitches are closing the bridge. How is she supposed to get back?"

"She's not supposed to get back. No one is. That's what closing the borders means."

Pietro growled with frustration.

"They'll only keep the borders closed two or three days, maybe a week," Vito said. "Unless he does declare war."

Pietro stormed off. Vito ran after him and caught him by the shoulder. "Where do you think you're going, you baby?"

"To Vijnul, of course, to Elena."

Vito's expression grew hard. "Oh, no! And leave me home again with everybody crying and moaning? The hell you will! Whenever anything bad happens, you run off and do something stupid and I have to listen to them all. Not this time! I'm tired of being the one to pick up the pieces after one of your tantrums. We're going home!" He grabbed Pietro by the elbow and tugged.

Pietro knocked his hand away. "My whole life's falling apart and all you can do is complain!"

"Once again your life is falling apart, oh, boo hoo hoo! Romantic idiot. You're eighteen years old, your life isn't falling apart, and if it were, it's not much of one, so get over it. Please," he pleaded, "please try and think for once. Use that classical education you used to be so proud of. How would Plato handle this? He'd think it through, that's what he'd do. So let's try to think this through. If you try to cross the bridge, what'll happen? I'll tell you what'll happen. Those soldiers will order you to pack your butt home. Then you'll probably get mad and try to push through, and they'll beat you up and arrest you, maybe even shoot you. Then what? Mama will cry, Pa will blame himself, your baby'll grow up without a father, Elena'll cry and howl and finally marry some other poor boob. You'll end up as nothing more than a romantic story she tells to bore her grandchildren. *That's* what will happen."

Pietro scuffed at the street. "You have no soul, Vit'."

"I'd rather have a brain in my head."

"Damn it." Pietro fell back against a streetlight. "Then what should I do?"

"You do what any sane person would do. You wait."

"Oh!" Pietro cried. "It's not fair! Who made the world this way?"

"We did," Vito said. "People. Every one of us. Because we each try to do whatever we want to do, or think we want to do, and meanwhile everybody else is doing whatever they think they want to do, and all of that wanting and doing gets mixed up together in one big, messy, senseless stew, and that's human society. If we all sat down and thought things through clearly, we might be able

to make sense of it. But trying to figure it all out is hard work, so most of us just go along saying 'Okay, okay' to whatever happens and blaming each other or history or God for the crap we've gotten ourselves into." He looked up. "Damn, that's pretty good. I should write it down for my next article."

The noise of an engine caught Pietro's attention. The soldiers had climbed back into their LMV and were driving off. The barricades remained on the bridge, unmanned, looking lonely and ineffectual and frail.

A light sparked in Pietro's eyes.

"Oh no you don't!" Vito grabbed at his arm.

Pietro shook free and hurried down to the bridge.

"Damn it, Pietro, come back!"

Pietro reached the bridge and turned. Vito caught up to him.

"Vit', don't say anything. I have to do this."

"No, you *don't* have to do this!"

Pietro shook his head. "Someday you'll understand. Someday you'll fall for a girl and you'll do stupid things for her. And all your philosophy and political theory won't do any more to stop you than my Greek and Latin." He smiled. "Vit', I might not see you or Mama and Papa for a long time. Don't be mad at me."

"I could strangle you right here!"

Pietro grinned.

"You got any money?"

A tremor of anxiety rippled across Pietro's face. "I don't know. Yes, I've got twenty, twenty-five."

Vito sighed with disgust. "Doesn't even know how much money he has." He pulled out his wallet and offered the few bills he had.

Pietro took them. Then he took Vito's hand and whispered, "Thanks, Vit'."

"Go on. Hurry up, before the soldiers come back."

Pietro nodded, turned, and ran across the bridge. When he had reached the far side he turned and waved. Vito waved back, shook his head, and started for home.

ON THE DAY FOLLOWING the aborted by-election, Galli returned to his office in Fricchi and convened his Green lieutenants. “We have to find out immediately what the President is planning. I can’t believe he wants to actually start a war. That would be disastrous nonsense, although disastrous nonsense does seem to be the *modus operandi* of this administration. Did he engineer this crisis just to postpone the by-election? That would also be disastrous nonsense, to cause an international standoff just to keep a Green out of Parliament. Why should he fear a Green in Parliament more than an international embarrassment? No, it’s too ridiculous, even for Zanni. We must find out the facts. What have you learned about the riot and the explosions?”

A woman of ageless beauty, dressed in very chic style, said, “My girlfriend was at the concert. She reports that the riot was indeed initially incited by Ma Bang, who made anti-Serennian remarks and sang a song, a very ill-judged song, that’s now a huge hit in Roijna. But my friend also says that some Zannis had entered the hall despite the police cordon — you can imagine how that was arranged — and they started the actual attack on the stage.”

“Ah. She is certain these were Zanni’s men?”

“She sat at the back of the hall, she saw them enter, she recognized several of them from other protests.”

“Good. Thank you, Elisa. And those explosions?”

A white-haired man responded. “The explosions came from the sewers. Zanni has implied that Roijnan terrorists exploded bombs, but city workers confirmed privately that the sewer system is kept in such poor repair that explosive gases frequently build up in them. In fact, they’re surprised the sewers haven’t blown up before this. So the explosions were likely accidental.”

“Accidental? Are you suggesting this was a mere coincidence, Marcello?” Galli said.

“Not coincidence,” Marcello said. “The Zannis were setting off firecrackers, according to all the reports I’ve seen. If one of them fell into a sewer ...”

“Or was tossed,” Elisa suggested.

Galli thought quickly. “Is there any way we can prove that?”

Elisa shrugged. “Unlikely. My friend saw the Zannis, but will she testify publicly? I doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“Too dangerous. The extremists are in control now. You heard what happened

at *The People's Voice*. No one who opposes Zanni's authority is safe, not with these thugs around to do the President's dirty work, not to mention police complicity."

"And it'll take time to collect official reports on the sewer system, if there are any available, and probably some ready cash for bribes," Marcello added.

Galli sighed. "Well, we'll think about that. The first panic is dying down, common sense might return."

A fat young man with glasses and a tuft of black hair hanging over his brow snorted. "And I might flap my arms and fly to the moon."

"Russo, what have you learned about the President's recent actions?"

"Only what we already know from the television news. He's working day and night and only leaves the Palace to sleep, and sometimes not even for that. He's been receiving a series of European diplomats, first from the Czech Republic, then from Poland, Hungary, Germany, and today he met with the Austrian ambassador. What's odd is that he has not made photo ops out of these visits. No press conferences, no pictures."

Galli considered this. "Bad, very bad. He's either trying to make it look like he's preparing to declare war, or he really is preparing to declare war."

"Exactly."

"Enough of Zanni. Renata, what about Pucci?"

The young woman read from her notes. "We have been unable to obtain any certain news of Sig. Pucci's activities for the past two days."

Galli's eyebrows shot up. "What? How is that possible?"

"Sig. Pucci has always acted mostly behind the scenes," said Renata, "but in the last two days he's become practically invisible. All we know is, first, on Sunday afternoon he was seen briefly on via Libicocco getting into his car. Yes," Renata replied to the unspoken question on Galli's face, "near the home of former Minister Vaghi. On Monday one of our people glimpsed him walking up via Cesaro. As you know, the via Cesaro is behind the Plaza di Ganimedo, where Sig. Fedoro lives."

Galli's eyes darkened. "Do we know if he's met with any other of the former cabinet members?"

Renata shook her head. "These are our only reports. However, we do know that Sig.ra Frusoni remains in Frankfurt, unable to return, of course, because the borders are closed."

"I'd love to know why she went there in the first place," Galli thought. His lieutenants waited patiently. He stood and began to pace. "Zanni stays in the Palace. Pucci is meeting secretly with the former ministers. What the hell are they up to? Marcello, any word from the military?"

Marcello coughed. "Only that the army stands ready to move. General Franchi announced last night that he favors a pre-emptive strike against ... well, against whoever threatens us. Since no one has threatened us, this comment has drawn some criticism in the newspapers. Franchi is a known rightwing hawk, so this was no surprise, but any hint of readiness to attack naturally raises the discourse to a new and dangerous level."

"That announcement was planned," Galli said. "Franchi is Zanni's puppet, or should I say Pucci's." He shook his head. "I've been trapped in Borgo for the last week out of touch with the real world. What are the foreign papers saying about all this?"

Elisa lifted a thick stack of newspapers to the table and slid them one by one across to Galli. "*Freitag* writes that the United Nations should intervene and faults them for not acting quickly. *Wiener Zeitung* explores the economic ramifications of sanctions against Serenno. *Le Monde* has published an article explaining the whole history of Balkan politics, military actions, racial unrest, and so on, which is rather odd since neither Serenno nor Roijna are Balkan. *Corriere della Sera* blames our multiparty system and demands that it be restructured into a two-party system, Conservative and Communist. *La Vanguardia* explores whether Serenno and Roijna have a chance at the World Cup. There has been no mention in the U.S. press at all."

"Nothing new there. Very well." Galli frowned. "One: We need to know what Pucci is up to. Two: We need to convince the papers to investigate the source of the explosions. Get together any reports you can, eye witnesses — anonymous, if they insist. Even anecdotal evidence is better than nothing. Try to get some of those city workers to talk. We probably won't get any action in the press right now, but we've got to be ready when passions cool. Three: We ought to try to get to the ex-ministers, we might learn something in the way they refuse to talk to us. Meanwhile, I'll start canvassing the members of Parliament, see which way the wind blows. I can't think any of them are happy with this turn of events. Maybe if we join up with the Progressives we can force a parliamentary investigation. Having Stanco's seat still vacant will help." He looked at the doubtful faces ranged before him. "Unlikely, I know, but worth a try. Elisa, contact those ambassadors, Czech, Hungarian, all the rest, try to learn something. And type up that story your friend gave you. I'll get it to the papers, someone might pay attention."

Elisa nodded and scribbled notes.

"And Renata, double the people watching Pucci, we need full knowledge of his movements as soon as possible."

"But—"

“I know you don’t know where he is right now, but with enough people on the streets we’ll run across him. He’s not easy to hide.”

She smiled. “Yes.”

“You, Marcello, get those reports on the condition of the sewer system together, make them intelligible, coordinate with Elisa’s witnesses, start calling all your contacts at the *Voice*, the *News*, anybody who might be interested.”

“The *Post*?”

“No point trying there. Don’t forget the radio and television stations. There has to be one young journalist eager to get famous.”

The man nodded.

“Russo, get hold of your contact in the Palace. Find out what Zanni’s doing, every hour, every minute. We need information.”

They all rose and hurried to their tasks.

Galli turned to the window, to the bright sunshine and the sight of people going about their business. Oh, he thought, if I were a fly on the wall in the Palace right now ...

The reflection of the afternoon sun off the President’s desk almost blinded Angelica. She blinked but continued writing in her notepad as the President droned on. Her breakdown in the cabinet chamber had been passed over in silence, with nothing more than an embarrassed, condescending pat on the shoulder. He no longer raged, no longer cursed. He had become indefatigable and imperturbable. His eyes sparkled, he moved with a wide stride, every word was a declaration, every whim an urgent necessity. Obviously, crisis suited him.

Angelica sat beside the desk. Italo Grop sat in his chair by the door, hands folded quietly in his lap. No expression troubled his broad, pale face. Only now and again did a quick, stealthy glance at the light streaming through the window betray a deep yearning to be elsewhere.

Angelica moved in a permanent trance now. She knew, however, that she was working more efficiently than ever before. When the President wished something, needed something, there was no margin for error. She worked well, amazingly well, yet her work horrified her. Every day brought a new offense to her sense of justice and decency. She had always believed a president could do nothing unjust or indecent, though he might make mistakes, of course, that was human nature. That belief was now dead. Her heart and stomach told her that closing the borders, ignoring the law, firing the cabinet, writing secret orders, that terrible day in the cabinet chamber, and poor Sig. Mitek sitting there with his legs crossed — all this could not be right. Thank goodness she was too busy for another nervous collapse.

“And therefore I regretfully am forced to deny myself the pleasure of your charming company,” Zanni dictated. “Your sincere colleague, etc., etc. Make sure that’s delivered tomorrow morning, no earlier than ten.”

Angelica snapped the pad shut. “The Swedish ambassador is still waiting.”

Zanni waved his hand impatiently. “Send him away, I don’t have time for him.”

“He’s been waiting over an hour.”

“Then he’s been wasting his time.” Zanni smiled. “Sweden doesn’t matter, Angel. Try to understand that we must choose carefully whom we deal with.”

“Yes, Sig. President.”

“When is my call to Great Britain?”

“They’ve not responded. Yet.”

Zanni shoved himself back from his desk and snarled, “That’s gall for you! Not responded? Call the Prime Minister immediately and tell him that the President of Serenno wishes to speak with him at once!”

“Yes, Sig. President.” She stood.

He forced a rictus of a smile. “But politely, Angel, politely. You know how to do it.”

“Yes, Sig. President.”

“And find Pucci. I haven’t seen him since yesterday, where’s he been?”

Angelica, at the door, replied, “He said he had meetings.”

“What kind of meetings could he have that I’m not in?”

“I’m sorry, Sig. President, he didn’t say.”

He huffed. “Get that call through to Great Britain. And get rid of that damned Swede.”

Angelica left.

The President muttered, “Screw Great Britain!” He looked at Grop, then smiled. “The poor girl doesn’t understand. Few do. Just you and me, Grup. Me because I’m in charge of it all, and you because you’re always at my side. The general and his faithful lieutenant. We are at war, you know, my friend. Yes, war. Undeclared so far, but that’s just paperwork. And because we’re at war, Serenno, little Serenno, unimportant Serenno, is suddenly the center of Europe. Everyone’s watching us and waiting, waiting to see what we’ll do. And why are we suddenly so important? Because I made us so, Grump. I said, ‘No, the Roijnans aren’t going to pull one over on us. No, the Conservatives won’t lose the majority.’ And so we’ve become very important in the world. Even Pucci doesn’t catch the full significance. People think he’s the brains, I know they do, I read the papers. But this time I did it all myself. He doesn’t see the big picture, he doesn’t know my plan. I’m making Serenno important in the EU. No one ever

bothered with Serenno before, we've never done anything that mattered. But now they're afraid of us. Everyone's afraid of me."

Grop watched the President, who took his blank expression as an attitude of profound admiration.

"Now," he said decisively, "where is that fellow Pucci? He never used to leave me alone for a minute, now he's never around when I want him. I want ... well, just between you and me, Grip, I want to gloat a bit. Yes, I'm only human after all. And I'd like to gloat, a little." He chuckled.

Pucci, who never gloated and did not admire those who did, sat at that moment in Mauro Luca's garden. The ex-minister was prowling among his flowers and leaned down to pluck off an insect as he said, "The simple fact is, he's lost it. Completely raving. No other way to put it. Look at this. What is this thing? What's it doing on my anemones? Never saw anything like it. And I specifically ordered the gardener to wipe out all parasites. He never listens to me."

"So," said Pucci, "we're agreed?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, yes. Unfortunate, of course, but there's nothing else to be done." His hand suddenly darted into the foliage. "Another one! I'm going to have to fire that gardener." He glanced at Pucci with an unhappy expression. "What about Eufemia?"

"I spoke with Sig.ra Frusoni this morning."

"Trapped in Frankfurt!" Luca chuckled. "She's probably climbing the walls."

"Naturally we couldn't speak freely on an open line. I still enjoy the President's trust, and while I don't think he'd start wiretapping without my knowledge ..."

"Yes, much better to be on your guard. Nothing he does would surprise me now. I can just see Zanni crouching in a dark closet, wires in his ears, drooling over a conversation between a servant and her unemployed boyfriend. Eufemia is on board with all this?"

"So I understand."

"This is terrible." Luca shook his head sadly.

Pucci was not sure if he referred to the political situation or the infestation in his anemones.

"All very disagreeable. Why doesn't Parliament move to stop him? Well, they're useless, absolutely useless. That's the basic flaw in democracy, Pucci — the *demos*, the people. Hopeless. It's just one long, dreary, unfunny comedy." Luca slowly crushed another insect between his fingers. He studied the remains with an acidic look, then wiped his hand on his handkerchief. "So. Everything's

in order. Thank you for your visit, Pucci.”

Pucci understood that the interview was over. He stood and bowed. “Thank you for your time, Sig. Luca.”

“You’ll prefer to leave through the back, no doubt.”

“That would be more prudent, thank you.”

Luca led him to a small door in the garden wall and punched a combination into the lock. The door swung open. “I don’t know what we’d do without you, Pucci,” he said. “We know well that your only care is for the honor and security of the state.”

“Goodbye, sir.”

The gate shut behind him. He looked up and down the street, saw no one, and went quickly to his car, parked two streets to the north.

In a Volkswagen parked near the garden gate, a young woman opened her cellphone, punched a button, and said, “Sig. Galli, right away, it’s Adrienne. Important.” She waited a moment, then: “Yes, Sig. Galli. He just left. ... At least thirty minutes. ... Through the back gate of the Luca estate, I know it quite well, I worked a party there six months ago. ... Yes. I’ll warn Jacob, he’s waiting near Pucci’s car. ... Thank you, sir. Thank you.”

She hit the buttons again, then said quickly, “Jacob! Adrienne. He’s coming, don’t lose him.”

Galli replaced the receiver and tapped his fingertips together while volunteers circled him. What were these secret meetings about? Did Zanni hope to pacify the ex-ministers and get them back on board? That would be a bit of a coup, but could he pull it off? They were, after all, politicians and would do anything if it were to their own advantage. If Parliament could act ... but the parties were perfectly balanced now, the Conservatives on one side, the Progressives, Greens, Socialists, Communists, and all the rest on the other. If he could just get Onesti into that empty seat! But as it stood now, if the cabinet should reconvene ...

The President could not hold off the by-election much longer. Sooner or later the eastern province would demand its representative, all the more so now, as they were the province that directly bordered on Roijna. But if Zanni could continue to frighten the people, prolong the state of emergency ... The only real hope is to get Onesti into office, thought Galli. Break the stalemate.

He picked up the phone again. “Onesti, Galli here,” he said, with as much forced gaiety as his bass voice could deliver.

“Oh,” answered Onesti.

“Good news! The riot was certainly incited by Zanni himself, or rather by those thugs of his, just as I said.”

“Hm,” said Onesti. “Interesting.”

“And the explosions were most likely accidental, caused inadvertently by the same idiots who started the riot. Therefore he’ll have to end this state of emergency soon, two, three more days at the most. We’ll demand that the election take place immediately. We need to prepare—”

Onesti interrupted. “I won’t ... I’m not going on with this.”

Galli caught his breath. “Pardon me?”

“I can’t,” Onesti said. “I can’t go on with it.” His voice broke. “I can’t.”

Galli breathed deeply and said, with perhaps honest compassion, “Ugo, my friend, I understand completely. The last days have been dreadful, simply dreadful. More than anyone could be expected to bear. But believe me, it’s not the end of the world. Every politician goes through this. Or something like it.”

“I won’t run,” Onesti repeated.

“You need a rest. And what better time than now, when we can do nothing until that fool Zanni backs down? Relax, get some sleep ...”

“I won’t run.”

“Two or three days without a care, no speeches to make, in the bosom of your family, and you’ll feel—”

Onesti said, without emotion, “My family is gone.”

“Excuse me?”

“My family is gone. My son’s fled to Roijna, to Vijnul, to be with his wife. Giuliana hasn’t left her bed since yesterday. I haven’t seen Vito since last night, he could be anywhere, doing God alone knows what.” Onesti’s voice grew rough. “The whole might of the President of my country has been brought against me. Against me, Ugo Onesti! A man who wanted nothing but to do his job, raise two good boys, grow old with his beautiful wife, and sit in a bistro in the evenings over a glass of wine and a pastry or two.” He laughed, a heartbreaking sound. “It’s almost funny, isn’t it?”

“Onesti ...”

“I was nobody, and now I’m the cause of a war. Everything’s gone, Galli. My job, my sons.” He breathed. “Well, I may not have anything left, but I by God can do one last thing before I wither away into the infinite void. I can say no. No, Galli. No. It’s over. The comedy you’ve been writing around me is done.”

He hung up.

Galli listened to the dial tone for several seconds. Then he calmly hung up the phone. He sat quietly until Russo approached.

“Sir.”

Galli looked up at Russo absently. “Hm? Yes?”

“I have a copy of the President’s calendar.”

Galli looked at him a moment. He looked down at his desk. He nodded and

looked up again. “Good. Give it here. And get hold of Soavi, we have to put on some pressure to open an inquiry.”

PRESIDENT BOBO ZANNI lay on the new sofa in his office — he had been sleeping there on occasion recently — looked back over his day, and saw that it was good.

He had awoken that morning with the sunlight skipping perkily over the roofs of Fricchi and plunging through his window to paint the room gold. His wife was still asleep and he savored almost a full hour of utter quiet. He put away all thoughts of the reports and news and urgent business that awaited him and instead read a chapter of a biography of Pericles. He did not understand all the long words that the author scattered across his pages like peppercorns, and the Greek names tended to blur together, but the overall atmosphere of high ideals, vain heroism, and intellectual attainment pleased him, and he turned over the pages with a glow of self-righteous pleasure. Perhaps he saw himself at the end of a long line from Pericles to Julius Caesar to Charlemagne to Louis VXI to Bismarck to ... well, to Zanni. And why not? The world stood at a crossroads. Factions contested everywhere: religious fanatics and political fanatics, dreamers and monsters, the perfidious and the credulous. A man was needed who would take charge and say, "This is how we shall be, this is the way we must take." Such men always arose from improbable places, and Serenno was surely the most improbable of improbable places from which a hero might rise. If only a man had the courage to stand up and proclaim, "This is how it shall be, this way and no other," who knew what might happen? Bobo Zanni felt the heavy hand of destiny upon him. Every moment led him nearer and nearer to immortality.

He had breakfasted well, his wife said nothing to trouble him. She had just begun to complain about an imagined slight from one of the servants when their second daughter visited with her child and the conversation was transmuted to baby talk. Italo Grop knocked at the President's door punctually. His appearance sent the baby into paroxysms of hysterical weeping. Zanni kissed it, kissed his daughter, kissed his wife, and left the house with a spring in his step. Miraculously, there were no reporters lying in ambush outside the door with their impertinent, suspicious smirks. The limousine took him quickly to the Federal Palace and there were no reporters there either, and no protesters, not a one. No placards, no cries of "Zanni lies, who dies?" The President entered the Palace and Grop followed behind him. The guard at the door snapped a smart salute. "Good morning, Sig. President."

"Yes, yes it is, thank you," Zanni replied. He normally would not have spoken

to a mere guard, but it was such a pleasant day.

Angelica met him at his office door. "Good morning, sir!" She looked happy. She had not looked happy for quite some time. Her smile was radiant. He actually thought the word *radiant*.

He said, "It is a very good morning, isn't it, Angel'? And how are you today? You look wonderful."

She blushed. "I'm well, thank you, sir. And you?"

He wondered at her blush. Maybe a man had finally entered her life; surely only a lover could raise that shade of rose. But he did not feel jealous, not a bit. He smiled in a fatherly way. "Simply wonderful, my dear. Will it last? Who knows? Let's see what's on the agenda."

"The Romanian ambassador at 9:30, sir," Angelica read from her pad. "Then your barber. Lunch with the local Business Owners' Association, followed by a press conference."

Zanni clucked contentedly. "Reality intrudes on our happy scene. Ah, well, where are my notes for the ambassador?"

"Here." She handed him a few sheets of paper.

"Pucci?"

"He should be here any moment."

And at that very moment Pucci pushed through the door, dapper in a new brown suit.

"Hello, stranger!" the President said with a smile. "Welcome back. It's been some time since we've had the pleasure of seeing your shiny cheeks. Don't you look smart! Having your picture taken today?"

Pucci glanced at Grop, then handed the President a fax. "The U.N. has not succeeded in bringing sanctions against us. The United States vetoed the resolution."

Zanni's face shone more brightly than the sun. "Ha! Didn't I tell you? The whole world is behind us!" he crowed. "Come! Romania awaits!"

The ambassador from Romania, a short, serious man who carried a shadow with him that dampened the sunlight but could not dampen Zanni's mood, stood and bowed as the President and Pucci entered the conference room. Grop remained outside.

"Welcome, Sig. Ambassador!" said Zanni. "What word do you bring us from your beautiful country?"

The word was pleasing. The ambassador solemnly informed them that Romania would not object if Serenno found it necessary to press for a military solution to the current troubles; that is, would not object as long as Serenno did not mention Romania's complaisance. Romania was searching out diplomatic

friends in order to be invited into the European Union. The ambassador's counterpart in Roijna, in fact, was meeting at that moment in Kačni with Premier Kecal to promise that Romania would not object if Roijna found it necessary to press for a military solution to the current troubles.

"Couldn't be more agreeable," Zanni said after the ambassador left. "See, Pucci? I was right. The world recognizes our right to protect ourselves and even offers its assistance. And the U.S. vetoed the sanctions! Ha!"

The barber entered precisely at eleven o'clock. Grop followed him into the office.

Zanni smiled, "Ah, Sig. Parilo, on time as always. Beautiful day!"

The barber tied a sheet around the presidential neck. "As beautiful as it needs to be," he muttered.

"All I need to make the day perfect is one of your wonderful haircuts. So, Parilo, what do you think about the recent big doings?"

"Doings?" the barber said. He concentrated on the President's cowlick.

Zanni said, "The battle I'm fighting to keep Serenno free."

"Oh, politics. I don't pay any attention to that sort of thing."

"Eh?"

The barber moved the President's head to the right. "What have politics ever done for me? It's just a game for the rich and the poor to play. I'm middle-class, it doesn't affect me."

Zanni's smile slipped briefly. "I'm afraid, Parilo, you're not a serious man."

The barber shrugged. "I'm serious about serious things, but I don't bother myself with all that tripe, begging your pardon. It's enough for a man to do his job, feed his family, and mind his own business. 'Don't shove your nose in somebody else's oven,' that's what my father always said, and experience proves he was right to say it. We'd all do a lot better if everyone kept his nose in his own oven. Don't move, sir."

"You disappoint me, Parilo. I've known you, what, ten years or more? And now I find you're not a good citizen." Though he thought it might be convenient if more citizens were like the barber. "You're utterly depraved."

The barber shrugged again. "You never asked my opinion before, sir. Look down, please. Thank you."

Zanni suddenly cried out, "Angel'!"

Angelica instantly appeared in the doorway. "Yes, sir."

"Where are the businessmen lunching? Do I have to be driven?"

"No, Sig. President, they're in the blue room."

"Good. How many?"

"Twenty-two."

“In the blue room? That’s cramped for so many. Why not the hall?”

“They’re preparing the big hall for tonight’s dinner party.”

“Ah, yes. What’s on the lunch menu?”

“Goose.”

He frowned. “That’s too—”

“Boned.”

He smiled. “You think of everything.”

Angelica smiled and ducked her head.

“I like goose, but goose is difficult to eat gracefully,” the President explained to the uninterested barber. “Appearance is everything, Parilo. Can’t have the President tearing at his food like a wild dog.” The barber pulled the President’s head up and brought out the mirror. Zanni inspected his image with satisfaction. “Very good.”

“Just doing my job.”

The barber brushed and powdered the President. Grop opened the door for him as he left, and Pucci came in immediately after.

“I do like goose,” Zanni said. “Ah, here’s Pucci, let’s go.” He started down the hall. The two large men fell into position behind him. “You like goose, Grip? But you can’t come in with us, of course. Can’t have you frightening the good businessmen. Pucci, make sure he gets a plate, will you?”

Pucci said, “Yes, sir, of course,” and nodded to Grop.

Zanni strode down the corridor. “All these businessmen are good Conservatives?”

“Of course. All Party members, all donors. You will reassure them that you will not act imprudently. You will reassure them that their investments are safe.”

“I know all that.” He stopped before a door and straightened his jacket. “Announce me.”

Pucci pushed open the door, stepped in, and declared, “Gentlemen, the President of Serenno.”

The Serennian businessmen turned to the door as one and rose to their feet. Zanni marched past Pucci, Grop took up his position in the hallway, and the door whisked closed with a soft hush. The businessmen applauded. Zanni glowed at the lovely sound. “Good afternoon, my friends,” he said. “Welcome to the Federal Palace.”

Someone shouted, “Bravo!”

Zanni modestly lowered his eyes. This brought forth another “Bravo!” and someone shouted, “Hurrah!”

Zanni put on a gentle smile, the smile of a saint in an icon, and smiling so, felt himself a saint. This is why I work so hard and suffer so, he thought. For my

people. The good people, the wise people, the practical, level-headed folk who appreciate my efforts to keep them free and prosperous.

He gestured for them to sit. Pucci also sat, but Zanni remained standing at his place. Every face but one, Pucci's, looked up to him. Twenty-two round, fat, contented faces.

"My friends," the President said, "once again, welcome to the Federal Palace. Of course, that's presumptuous of me. The Federal Palace does not belong to me. No. It belongs to you, and to all the people of Serenno. I'm only a temporary tenant, here at your pleasure. We politicians are ephemeral. Mere mayflies, here for a day, then snuffed out, forgotten. It is you, the business leaders of our land, who are the stable base of our country and the source of all its prosperity. Conservative or Progressive," though they were all of course Conservatives, "you are the spine of our nation, allowing us to stand tall and proud. I come here today—"

Applause made it impossible to go on. He allowed them to express their admiration.

Finally the noise died down.

"Thank you, my friends, thank you. In these dark days, when abominable forces threaten us from all sides, when the most ardent patriot wonders where to turn, sometimes, I must admit, I feel some doubt about even my deepest convictions. I do. I don't suffer from any illusion of omnipotence, whatever the papers say." The businessmen booed lustily. "Your approval today shows me that I have done right not to stray from the strict path I've taken." Applause. Some of the businessmen stood.

"The secret," the President confided to Grop after lunch, "is to acknowledge the problems and then ignore them. That shows you're strong." He slapped Grop on the shoulder, or as near the shoulder as he could reach. "Well, my good man, we've got the businessmen right in the palm of our hand. Now let's see about those damned reporters."

The auditorium was not so full as it had been in the past: some reporters did not trouble to come, depending on the Palace's press releases, and many had been denied press passes. It had been simple, after all, to arrange this unavoidable ritual so that the President would not be disturbed by inappropriate questions or unseemly opposition. All they had to do was deny a press pass to any reporter who would not behave appropriately. The others did not protest; they did not dare. The new procedure inspired them to keep a tighter lock on their own impertinent tongues.

Zanni mounted the dais and looked out over the compliant members of the press, guardians of truth and curators of the nation's liberties. This was how a

press conference should be. Everyone respectful and polite. Whatever he said would be accepted without a murmur and published directly from the handouts as written. No one asked, "When is Parliament expected to bring formal charges against you for the kidnapping of Karl Mitek?" Instead they asked, "How has the Roijnan government responded to your demand for the extradition of Karl Mitek?" No one asked, "Why did you push the *National Post* to investigate Ugo Onesti for the sole purpose of destroying his candidacy?" Instead they asked, "Do you plan to fill the parliamentary vacancy during this state of emergency?" No one asked, "Why did you lie and say Roijnans started the riot and exploded bombs in our streets, when the explosions were caused by gas from our derelict sewer system and the riot was started by your own gang of hired thugs?" Instead they asked, "What actions are you taking to secure the borders and keep our people and property safe?" And of course no one asked, "Do you seriously think you can get away with starting a war against Roijna?" Instead they asked, "Do you think diplomacy can help avoid this war, or are we already past that possibility?"

Everything went quite nicely. The reporters even laughed at the President's attempts at jokes.

Yes, it's been a good day, thought the President as he lay on his new sofa. He stretched and sighed and looked at the evening sky outside the window. Everything's rolling out just as I decided it should. The Stanco affair is almost completely forgotten. Parliament is balanced perfectly between our faction and the damned liberals. That Green loser is nullified, the by-election is permanently postponed. Europe and the rest of the world is waiting, waiting for me, frightened of me, frightened of what I might do. And I've done it all by myself. Pucci's been no help at all these last few weeks, why, my grandchild would be more helpful. I wonder why Pucci's been so moody lately. Never thought I'd say it, but he's becoming irrelevant. No better than anyone else. But I've managed to pull it off anyway. I've shown them all.

A soft noise drew his attention from this happy rumination. He glanced at the door. "Oh, Grep! I forgot you were there. I must have been dozing."

Grop stood.

"I didn't mean to keep you so long. Anyway, I suppose it's time to get ready for this damned state dinner."

Grop moved toward the President.

Zanni lifted himself on his elbow. "I'm tired, Grimp. I didn't realize just how tired I am. It's been a long day, and you know, I'm not a kid anymore. This endless round keeps me energized, but ... my mistake was lying down for a moment."

Grop stood beside the sofa. He towered over the President.

Zanni looked up at him curiously.

“Excuse me, sir,” Grop said. His voice was high in pitch for one so large, and as gentle as a nursemaid’s. He reached out his hand and drew a cushion from under the President’s head.

“Eh?” said Zanni.

“I’m sorry,” Grop said. “Wiser heads than mine think this will be best.”

Zanni, uncomprehending, frowned up at the enormous fellow.

Grop raised the cushion. “Nothing personal, Sig. President. It’s just politics.”

“But ... Grop ...”

Grop placed the cushion over the President’s face and pressed, pressed, pressed. The struggle did not last as long as he had anticipated. When he was certain the result was irrevocable, he pulled the cushion away. Zanni’s face showed flustered confusion. Grop raised the President’s head and replaced the cushion beneath it. He arranged the President’s arms decently upon his chest. He brushed the hair back from the forehead. One eye was open wide. Grop delicately closed it.

He stepped back, surveyed the scene, and went to the telephone. He dialed.

“Yes, Sig. Pucci. I’m sorry, sir, but the President has evidently passed away. ... Yes, I’m afraid so. Perhaps his heart. ... No, there was no pain. He died in his sleep. ... Yes. ... Very good, sir, I’ll wait. Goodbye.”

He looked down at the President again, sighed, and went to his chair by the door to await the inevitable furor.

IN THE HAPPY, peaceful country of Serenno, where the weather is always pleasing and people mind their own business, Vice President Salo was rushed to Fricchi from his country cottage and quickly and unceremoniously sworn in as President of the Republic. The ceremony was held in Angelica's small office because the body of the former president still lay on the sofa in the President's office. Pucci, Grop, and Angelica witnessed the ritual. A judge recited the ancient formula, Salo repeated it, Pucci looked solemn, Angelica sniffled. Grop faded unnoticed into the background.

The public inauguration took place three days later immediately following the state funeral. A procession trundled the casket three times around the Federal Palace. Crowds holding cellphones and digital cameras lined the sidewalks and snapped photos as it passed. Sig.ra Zanni followed the casket on foot. She wore a tasteful black dress, without jewelry, without a veil, so that all could see her set face. Some believed she bravely withheld her tears, others thought she looked angry. Whatever thoughts passed through her mind, she kept them to herself; though her husband had never learned the lesson, she knew the value of keeping her mouth shut.

The body was carried off to the cemetery and buried, then the politicians and reporters hastened back to the front steps of the Federal Palace, where a stage had been erected, for the public inauguration. Sig.ra Zanni did not attend. She went home with her daughters and later that same day left for Paris, where she enjoyed a well-deserved anonymity. There she remained the rest of her long life, and there we leave her.

Television cameras were ranged on the Palace lawn. Rows of seats, already full, faced the stage. Upon the stage was a line of empty chairs. Pucci stood to one side with the old High Court judge who had privately administered the oath of office. Italo Grop stood almost hidden beside of the stage, only the top of his head visible above the boards.

The inauguration itself lasted but two minutes. The judge again intoned the oath of office, Salo again repeated it, loudly, into the microphones. Pucci then stepped forward and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the Republic, Nessuno Salo."

The audience stood and applauded. President Salo, a perfectly unmemorable man, bowed to Pucci, bowed to the judge, bowed to the audience. A weak shout of "Bravo!" was heard. He raised his hands, and the audience waited for the

inaugural address to pass.

“My dear compatriots,” Salo intoned in an emotionless voice, “we have come together today in sadness, sadness for the untimely passing of a great man, a great human being, a great leader of our country. Only once in a generation can a nation expect to know such a man. I know I can never hope to eclipse the memory of Bobo Zanni. I can only strive to live up to his shining example.”

Heaven forbid, thought Galli, sitting in the fifth row of the audience. But Salo is a walking desert, a living vacancy. With a little effort he might attain such a nadir of inanity. Watch and wait.

Anna Fadena, standing with Leo Fazi under a tree behind the rows of seats, raised her eyebrows. Her thoughts were not so politely expressed as Galli’s, but ran along the same lines.

Ugo Onesti sat in the Café Ris with his friend Aldo Tretta and former colleague Emilio Stasi. The three were drinking from a bottle of brandy which Onesti, with a grand gesture, had paid for with the last of his cash.

“You hear?” Tretta said. The radio blared the inauguration while the waiter leaned across the bar to listen. “Business as usual.”

“I’m not interested,” Onesti said.

“Onesti’s had his fill of politics,” Stasi said. “I don’t blame you at all. It’s a dirty business, and no doubt about it.”

Onesti said softly, “I don’t want to discuss it.”

“Of course not. Let’s change the subject. You’ve heard the latest, haven’t you?”

“What?” said Tretta.

“The chief’s announced his retirement.”

Onesti looked shocked. “Is that true?”

“It is. And can you guess why?”

Onesti shook his head.

“I don’t like to gossip, but they say it’s because ... you remember those rumors of Mitek bribing someone ...”

“No!”

The waiter standing at the bar by the radio hissed, “Ssh! Please, gentlemen, we’re trying to hear!” and turned up the volume.

“He won’t get much of a tip,” Tretta muttered.

“To fulfill President Zanni’s ideals,” President Salo continued, “I know too well that I cannot stand alone. For that reason I have invited the former cabinet ministers to return to their posts, and I am thrilled to announce that they have accepted. Tomorrow Sig.ra Eufemia Frusoni and the Signori Mauro Luca, Dionisios Vaghi, and Umberto Fedoro once again will take their rightful places

at the President's side to counsel and guide the state."

The audience applauded as Eufemia Frusoni, Mauro Luca, Dionisios Vaghi, and Umberto Fedoro each climbed to the stage, shook the President's hand, and took their places in the empty seats. Each wore an expression of serious and dignified sadness, but each radiated a healthy glow of vindication.

So, thought Galli, Pucci has laid his hand on the desert and made it green.

Anna Fadena marveled. Fazi elbowed her. "What did I tell you?"

"You could blow me down with a sneeze," she replied. "We need to look into this."

"Exactly," Fazi said. "Get on that right after the inauguration."

In the Green Cockatoo, Vito sat at the bar under the television and gulped his third beer. Sergio, sitting beside him, slapped the bar with both hands. "The culprits return to the scene of the crime!" he shouted. Two older men turned to scowl at him, but he paid no heed. "Now it'll start all over again."

Vito, already rather drunk, said, "Oh, no, it won't. Can't. Zanni's dead."

"And you have to wonder about *that*," Sergio said, laying a finger to his nose. "Heart attack? Ha! That bastard had no heart. He was stronger than you and me put together. Evil never dies. Mark my word, something stinks in Serenno."

Vito frowned. "You don't think ... ?"

"I'm saying nothing. For now. But just wait, kid, just wait."

From the television, President Salo continued. "These public servants will help our government return to its accustomed peace and efficiency, so horribly disrupted these past few weeks."

"Ha!" honked Sergio.

"Hm," growled Galli.

Anna shook her head.

"Our land has suffered much recently. The first order of business must be the parliamentary vacancy that has brought our legislative process to a standstill. To remedy that situation, I have decided, as is provided for in our constitution, to appoint Sig.ra Yolanda Nova of the Progressive Party to the Caprio provincial seat until the general election, to be held at its regular time in two years. Sig.ra Nova has given many years of her life to assure the good of our ..."

Murmurs rippled through the audience. Anna grabbed Fazi's arm. "Did I hear right?" she whispered. "Is that really legal?" Fazi patted her hand.

Galli closed his eyes and breathed deeply. So, Nova's struck a deal with the new administration while we were busy elsewhere. I'll have to visit the dear lady, and soon.

Aldo Tretta and Emilio Stasi kept their eyes on Onesti. He did not move. After a moment, he permitted himself a long, barely audible exhalation. Tretta

and Stasi relaxed.

“But,” said the President, “the most important problem facing us today is the sad rift that has come between us and our neighbors in the lovely land of Roijna. That such a misunderstanding should arise between two ancient allies is more than a mere problem, more even than a danger: it is a great shame to us both. I wish to remove that shame. My first official act as your President will be a meeting with the Premier of Roijna, face to face, in the Roijnan capitol city of Kačni.”

Now the murmurs in the audience swelled to a hurricane. President Salo raised his hands for silence, and the hurricane subsided to a gusty breeze.

“There I will announce the results of our investigation into the riot that disrupted our Festival of the Arts.” Salo looked directly into the cameras, his tiny eyes opened as wide as they could stretch. “Preliminary findings show conclusively that no Roijnan had any connection to the riot, and that no bombs were exploded.”

The audience leaned forward.

Galli thought, At last.

“We have learned,” said the President, “that in fact it was our own citizens who incited the riot.”

Anna whispered, “Is he going to admit to the Zannis?”

The President said, “According to our investigations, those to blame are members of certain anarchist organizations that have been tolerated too long in our liberal land.”

“Of course not.” Fazi shook his head.

In the Green Cockatoo, Sergio fell off his stool. Vito tried to catch him but missed. “Now it starts!” Sergio moaned from the floor. “Persecution! Pogroms! Arrests and kangaroo courts! We’re always the scapegoats. Shit!”

“You’re crazy,” Vito said. “Finish your beer.”

“I have to get out of here, now!”

“They won’t hunt anarchists here in Borgo, they’ll be looking in Fricchi. Besides, are you afraid of going to prison?”

Sergio glared at Vito. “If I’d done anything wrong, I’d be proud to go to prison. But I won’t go for something the fascist regime did itself.”

Vito thought a moment. “Makes sense to me,” he said. “Glad to see you’re not a romantic idiot.” He looked sad. “So you’re off. I kind of wish I could go with you.”

“Don’t scare me, Vit’,” Sergio said. “Enjoy being a kid a little longer. Growing up isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“How would you know?”

Sergio winked and rubbed Vito's hair, then turned and ran to the door.

"Good luck, Sergio," Vito called after him. "Maybe we'll see each other again, after all this has died down."

Sergio turned at the door and winked. "If it ever does. In the Green Cockatoo!" And he ran out.

Vito raised his beer in salute to nothing. "In the Green Cockatoo." He chugged it down. "Whoo! I ought to get home." He dropped some money on the bar and wove his way to the door while the monotonous voice of the new President droned on behind him.

"... demonstrate that our actions to protect ourselves, while perfectly natural under the circumstances, were ill-advised. Therefore I have ordered that the blockades at our borders be immediately raised so that we can rejoin the community of nations and welcome our neighbors back into our land with open arms."

The waiter and clients in the Café Ris cheered. Onesti closed his eyes and whispered, "Thank God."

Stasi said, "About time we got the bridges open again. I've been missing my weekly dinners at Chez Kibul in Vijnul. They have the best pörkölt outside of Budapest." He raised his glass in toast.

Salo turned another page in his script. "We will strive to repair our relations with our good neighbors as quickly as possible. We are already happy to announce that ..."

The door of the Café Ris banged open and the customers looked up, startled, as Sig.ra Sette rushed in. Onesti saw her and called, "Mother? What is it? I'm over here."

She hurried to his table. "Ugo, Ugo, come home, hurry!" She grabbed his arm and pulled him up.

"Oh God," he said with dread, "what now?"

"No, no, it's good news. Pietro's on the phone," she chattered, "Giuliana's speaking with him now, come!"

"Pietro?"

"He's been watching the whole thing on television, of course. He's coming to visit tomorrow morning."

Ugo was still dazed. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning. He's staying with the Miteks, right in their own house. And would you believe it? Mitek's hired him to work in his factory. No, not in the factory, I mean in his office. As an assistant of some kind. Oh, I don't know exactly, come home and he can tell you himself. Didn't I tell you it would work out? Come!"

Tretta jumped up and gave Onesti a quick hug. "Congratulations, Ugo! This is wonderful news!"

Stasi nodded solemnly. "Yes, it certainly is."

"I have to go," Onesti said while being dragged to the door.

"Good luck!" Tretta called to him as he left. He sat down again. "Thank goodness! Things are finally getting back to normal."

Stasi poured the last of the brandy into their glasses and raised his again. "To normality."

They touched glasses.

"Finally," President Salo went on, "to honor our dear late leader, I will commission a statue from the famous Roijnan sculptor Borislav Makman, a statue of our beloved President Bobo Zanni, to be erected here where I stand on the steps of the Federal Palace as an eternal symbol of our two nations' friendship, and in honor of the most selfless, the most generous, the most thoughtful president in our republic's glorious history.

"Dear friends, I enter today into an important and difficult stage of my political career. But I trust," he raised his voice to near-heroic tones, "that with your good wishes, and the example of my predecessor before me, I will be able fulfill my duties honorably. I know that together we will thrive and prosper, and our proud nation, home of liberty and justice, will stand as a beacon of light to all the world."

Galli remained in his seat while the audience buzzed around him. I wonder, he thought, whether I should stand up? I wonder if my legs will hold me? He looked at the sky, the vast, blue sky, the infinity that stretched above Fricchi and the little country of Serenno. Why stand up? he thought. To do what? What could anything I do matter? What does anything matter? The heavens will stay there whether I get up or not. Those clouds will blow across the sun without my puffing at them. I could fall to dust right here, right now, and the world would somehow keep on spinning. He looked at the people about him, gathered into little groups, discussing this and that. All their big words nothing more than vibrations in the air, their big ideas only silly notions they'd picked up here, there, anywhere, unquestioned, unexamined. Just empty suits and dresses puffed up with hot air. Nothing but unthinking habit in fancy habits. Costumes and customs.

Well, he thought, a new era commences. Maybe better than the old, but more than likely just the same. Still, possibility exists. There's always a chance of change.

He rubbed his eyes. He had things to do, meetings to attend, new comedies to

write. He must get hold of Sig.ra Nova before anyone else did.

Anna and Fazi strolled over the lawn. "I can't understand any of it," Anna said. "Who could have seen this coming?"

Fazi smiled. "After almost forty years in this business, I can say with assurance that the only surprising thing is that I'm still sometimes surprised."

"Look," said Anna, "there's Delsano, the *Post* whore."

"He doesn't look happy," Fazi commented. "No wonder. A new king rarely keeps the old king's jester on the payroll. Go say hello."

"I have better things to . . . he's seen us. Damn it, here he comes."

Delsano approached with a weary smile. "Greetings, colleagues," he said. "Incredible day, isn't it?" His eyes sat in dark circles, and he had allowed his hair to start showing its gray. "Out for a stroll?"

"Working, Davide," Anna said. "It's called covering the news. You remember that?"

"Ah, yes, I'd heard you found new offices. Where?"

"Via Tito, right behind the *Post* building. We'll be neighbors."

Delsano grinned. "Great! We can do lunch."

The three walked along the street together. "What are you up to these days, Delsano?" Fazi asked. "Is the *Post* treating you right?"

Delsano shrugged. "Always a crisis in that place. Usually a pointless one. You've heard they fired Nazario?"

"No!" Fazi had of course heard this. He winked at Anna.

"It's just outrageous. Of course it's all political, but nobody can figure out just what the politics are. He was the best editor in the paper's history, he lived and breathed that place. The new editor, Bice, well, I'm not impressed. This is the first good assignment I've had in days. You know, maybe I should join up with you folks. I always wanted to write for the *Voice*, but it's such a long walk from my apartment."

Fazi put on a thoughtful expression. "Not anymore. We'd love to have you."

Anna looked horrified.

"But I'm afraid we couldn't match your salary."

Delsano let a moment slip by while pretending to consider this. "The good fight doesn't often pay, does it? Well, I suppose I should stay on at the *Post*. Loyalty still means something to some people. Didn't help Nazario, of course." He sighed. "The guy who does his job and cares about it usually gets the shaft."

"And Zanni gets a statue," Anna marveled. "It's always the biggest crooks."

"Who wants statues of little crooks?" Fazi said.

Delsano smiled. "Don't worry. Have you seen Makman's work? It'll look like

a pile of off-kilter cubes and barbed wire, ugly as hell, and in a week it'll be covered in pigeon shit."

They laughed.

Giuliana was just coming out of the kitchen when Onesti and her mother returned. "Oh, Ugo, you're too late! Pietro just hung up. He's at work, Ugo, working very hard, too, it seems. Mitek's giving him a lot of responsibility."

Ugo panted from the climb up the stairs. "Did Mitek really give him a job?"

"Assisting him directly, yes, just imagine! You know, Pietro thinks Mitek's grooming him to take over the business when he retires. But he and Elena are coming over tomorrow morning, he can tell you all about it himself. I told them to bring the Miteks along, it's time we got better acquainted. I'm going to run along to the bakery and order a cake."

Onesti sat down. "Incredible!"

Giuliana opened a window. "What a day. Look at that sun! I can't remember the last really lovely day we've had. Now, Ugo, I want you to wear your nice blue suit tomorrow. You've been looking a bit sloppy these last few days. And shave!"

"Of course, of course."

The door opened and Vito stumbled in. "Hello, everybody!" he shouted.

"Oh, Vit'!" Giuliana cried. "What do you think? Your brother called! They're all coming to visit tomorrow."

"Huh?"

"And I want you to help me clean. Vito!" She sniffed. "You smell of beer again."

The telephone rang.

"Have you been with those terrible people? Didn't you hear the new president? Don't you understand how dangerous they are? When are you going to grow up and start acting responsibly!"

"Oh, Ma ..."

Ugo went into the kitchen and picked up the phone. "Hello, Onesti here."

"Ah, Sig. Onesti," said an unfamiliar voice.

"Yes?"

"Chancellor Utero here, how are you?"

"Chancellor ..." Onesti automatically lowered his voice to a deferential tone. "Why, yes, hello, sir! Thank you, I'm well. How can I help you?"

"Help me? Please, my dear Onesti, I'm calling to apologize for not being in touch with you for so long."

Onesti stared at the phone. "Pardon me?"

“But you understand, the constant rush of business, and things have been so confused lately. Well, Onesti, I wonder if you are aware of the latest developments in our department.”

“Eh?”

“Ah, then you haven’t heard that the chief has decided to retire?”

“Why ... yes, I believe I did hear something about that.”

“I’m so happy that you haven’t completely forgotten your old colleagues during your recent political adventures.”

Onesti felt a warm wave creep up his back.

“Now,” the Chancellor said, “you know how important the chief was to the department. He was one of our main liaisons with the national government, he knew so many people at that level, and now that he’s leaving us we of course have his large shoes to fill. I’ve been thinking and thinking, who could ever replace him? And then it struck me: Where is our good Ugo Onesti?”

“Where is our good Ugo Onesti,” Onesti repeated.

“Yes, exactly, where is Onesti. And I thought just now, after seeing the inauguration ... you saw the inauguration?”

“I listened to it.”

“I thought, Where is Onesti? He’s just the man for the job. These last weeks have shown undeniably that you have real leadership abilities, you’re able to handle a crisis, and your honesty and integrity are beyond question. And, of course, your political connections ... just what the post requires. And as you won’t be going to Fricchi, at least not for some years ...”

“No,” Onesti said.

“... I thought to myself, why, wouldn’t it be best for everyone — for us, I mean, but perhaps for you as well — wouldn’t it be best for everyone if you returned to lead the department?”

Onesti caught his breath.

“With your long years of service—”

“Yes,” Onesti interrupted.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, Chancellor, my answer is yes. I am pleased to accept your kind offer.”

The Chancellor gave an audible sigh of relief. “Wonderful! Let’s meet tomorrow morning to discuss—”

“No, not tomorrow morning,” Onesti said quickly. “I’m sorry, Chancellor, but I ... now that the borders are opened, I have a meeting with several people from Roijna tomorrow morning.”

“Roijna!” The Chancellor asked in a hushed voice, “Important?”

Onesti smiled. “Very important, sir.”

“Why, then, of course, of course.”

“I would be free tomorrow evening,” Onesti said.

“Eh? Yes, that would be just as well. Come at eight o’clock.” He added quickly, “If it’s convenient.”

“It will be most convenient, Chancellor. Thank you so much for this opportunity.”

“Nonsense, Onesti, it’s I who am grateful. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening.”

Onesti hung up the telephone and went back into the living room. Giuliana was reproaching Vito, Vito was ignoring her, Sig.ra Sette sat reading a newspaper. Onesti went to his chair. Giuliana glanced over and said, “Ugo? Are you all right, darling?”

He regarded them solemnly. “Giuliana, Mother, Vit’ ... I have something very important to say.”

They all looked to him expectantly.

He struggled for a moment to drag his thoughts into some sort of order.

“This is what I want to say. Some people believe that the world was created for a reason. That people are put on this earth for some grand purpose. But here’s the simple truth: Never believe for a moment that the world makes sense. There isn’t a lick of logic or reason to it. We’re slammed down here without a rule book, without a hint or clue, because there isn’t any ultimate puzzle that a hint or clue could solve. And so we stumble along any which way we can, until our little lives fizzle out. The world is nothing that we will understand. It’s nothing that *can* be understood. There’s nothing there *to* understand. It’s simply a mad jumble. But — and listen closely, Vito, this is for your generation to finally understand — but sometimes,” he eased back into his chair, “sometimes, if you don’t look for much, and if you don’t think too far ahead, it can turn out to be surprisingly comfortable.”

And the happy, peaceful country of Serenno sank again into its accustomed slumber.